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WORD BALLOONS

Of Origins Known

If there's one thing that's wrong with Hollywood adaptations of superheroes...Wait a minute. *One* thing?! OK, if there are *32* things wrong with TV/movie versions of comics heroes—you know, petty matters like campy atmosphere, secret identity revisions, casting, costume alterations, the use of gangsters instead of regular supervillains, the absence of proper credits for comics creators, adaptations by people who seem never to have read what they term "funny books" and at least 25 other misdemeanors...If there's *one* thing that's wrong with Hollywood adaptations of superheroes, it's the misguided reliance on filming the secret origins. Because let's face it—most origin stories *suck*.

Really. They're silly set-ups or pathetic premises from which to springboard heroes and heroines on to great adventures—almost all of which are inherently more interesting than the often dull or partly inept origins. I'd wager few of us were actually seduced into reading this or that comic regularly because of a spiffy origin issue; no, we climbed aboard—if not because of the creators or character involved—in the middle of the ongoing action because we just couldn't put that semi-serialized *story* down.

Sure, there are origins which are inherently dramatic and riveting on their own. Two alien parents sacrifice their all to send their son to a better life. A boy sees his parents killed before his eyes and vows vengeance. A patriotic weakling risks his own life to fight for freedom. A young high school student learns the lethal lesson that with power comes responsibility. This is all powerful, mythic stuff.

And yet as good as these origins are, I would rather read (and see Hollywood attempt to transform, if they must) any number of these heroes' other, non-origin adventures. Why not *The Killing Joke*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, any Joker, Ras al Ghul or Two-Face yarns?

When Jim Cameron's Spider-Man movie gets made—as surely, certainly, hopefully, it must—what would be better? A reworked origin? Or the filming of Spidey vs. the Master Planner (Doc Octopus), the Green Goblin confrontations (and Gwen Stacy's death), something with the Vulture, the Lizard or Mysterio or for more contemporary readers, Hobgoblin or Kraven the Hunter's final hunt?

Some may argue that there are other fabulous comics origins worth filming. But like, whose? Wonder Woman (don't kid me), Iron Man, Green Lantern (pick one), Namor, the Fly, Dr. Solar, Sgt. Rock, Captain Marvel (OK, maybe, the serial did it well). And which origin? Over the years, in the retelling, like the strongest of myths, certain origins—Wolverine, Daredevil, Swamp Thing (with "The Anatomy Lesson") come to mind—have become far richer, more detailed tales of transformation.

Still, I think overall it's a clear and mostly concrete conclusion. The non-origin stories are more exciting, more intriguing, more interesting. It's the same way that *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* or any James Bond film is somehow more satisfying than prattle about how they got to be adventurous, logical or lethal. Who cares *why* they're heroes, let's get to the *heroism*.

And yet in one adaptation after another, Hollywood keeps making these mistakes by stubbornly deciding to include origins. *Captain America* (whose fine heroic origin seems insufferably cornball on film), *Fantastic Four*, *Conan*, *The Shadow*, *Legend of the Lone Ranger*. *Batman* wisely tucked the origin into a flashback while *Superman I* actually kept its Krypton and Smallville sequences sparkling with their brevity; the movie really comes to life in Metropolis. But those are only two of the rare exceptions.

All of these thoughts arise because two screenwriters this issue, David S. Goyer and Ron Friedman, extensively discuss their movie adaptations of no less than five Marvel heroes—the seminal Dr. Strange, Blade, Luke Cage, the Ghost Rider and Nick Fury (a personal favorite, intended for TV).

Of course, a couple of these scripts—which, admittedly, given comics projects' track record, will *not* all get made—include, alas, those pesky, inevitable, irritating origins. And why? The general, non-comics audience *isn't* going to care. And we comics fans—whether we know the origin intimately or not—would prefer to see the best *story* on the screen.

Hey, Hollywood, that's how you can make *good* comics-based movies. Give us a story. And just keep all those heroic origins where they belong. Keep 'em secret.

—David McDonnell/Editor

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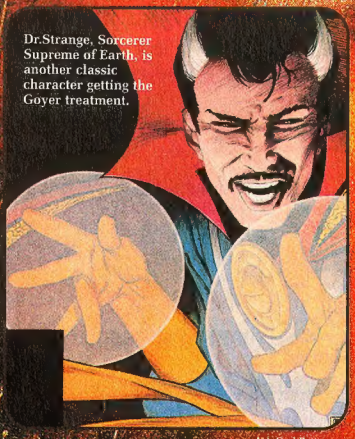
GHOST WRITER!

David S. Goyer brings Marvel's Midnight Sons to the movies.



Dr.Strange, Sorcerer Supreme of Earth, is another classic character getting the Goyer treatment.

Art: Carl Potts

By PAT JANKIEWICZ

Photo: Tom Jankiewicz

"There's a lot of excellent work in comics. I don't regard it as a bastard medium," states David Goyer, Marvel's number one screenwriter.

Art: Bill Sienkiewicz

At the trendy Book Soup Bistro on Southern California's fabled Sunset Strip, screenwriter David S. Goyer orders another hot tea. "I have a cold," he explains. Besides battling a horrifying head cold, the scribe is also resurrecting the Marvel Age of Monsters.

After decades of disappointment on the big screen, Marvel heroes may be finally getting their due. With heavy-hitters like Spider-Man, the Hulk and the Fantastic Four in the works at major studios, it was only a matter of time before the monsters made it, too. Under the guidance of Stan Lee and Marvel Films president Avi Arad, Goyer is helping bring the Midnight Sons to the movies.

Now, after scripting and/or co-writing several genre and action films (including Jean-Claude Van Damme's *Death Warrant* and *Robert A. Heinlein's The Puppet Masters*), Goyer has been awarded the task of getting three of Marvel's more menacing characters on the Hollywood fast track. Sporting a goatee and a self-effacing grin, he seems like just the man for the job.

Goyer's screenplay for *Ghost Rider* has gotten the project rolling at Savoy Entertainment, an amazing feat as the skull-headed cyclist has languished unadapted since his creation. (He came close to being filmed by Dino De Laurentiis in the 1980s). The problem with adapting "The Spirit of Vengeance" is that there are now two major versions of him: the original Ghost Rider, Johnny Blaze, and the new grimmer, grittier Ghost Rider, Dan Ketch, who is inhabited by a fiery spirit of vengeance. (And of course, long-time fans know that in the '50s and the '60s, the Ghost Rider was a Western comics hero, later renamed Night Rider for his '70s-90s rides).

"The Ghost Rider in this movie is John Blaze with all the accouterments of the Dan Ketch Ghost Rider, so it's the look, feel and urban setting of Dan Ketch. The girl friend will be Roxanne and we have her father, 'Crash' Simpson. This Ghost Rider is much more of a bad boy, he has the chain and spikes, the best of both worlds. In the movie, he can only be Ghost Rider at night, and as soon as the dawn's rays hit him, he reverts to Blaze. I think it's important when dealing with supernatural characters that you have some rules and Achilles' heels.

"People love the Ghost Rider image and the concept, but I never thought it was an incredibly well-written book," he admits. "Even the concept had many flaws, both the old and the new versions. It's a really convoluted story.

"When I adapted Blade, it was simple," continues Goyer. "His mother was bitten by a vampire while she was pregnant, so he grows up with one foot in both worlds. I found the old Ghost Rider origin confusing—Roxanne just happens to show up, had conveniently looked through some occult books, and can do a spell to banish Mephisto.

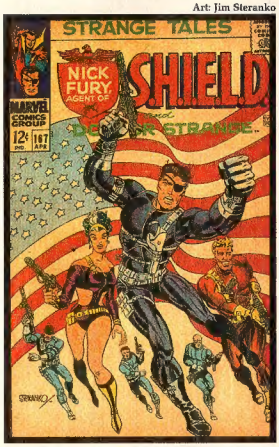
"I never understood Mephisto's motivation [in harassing John Blaze]—they would say the devil's just bad because he's bad; he torments people because that's what he does. Conversely, the new Ghost Rider is even more convoluted. I can't understand where this mystical bike comes from; it's just there. What I like about the new Ghost Rider is the look and powers."

Transgressors beware! Ghost Rider, Marvel's dark spirit of vengeance, is poised to ignite theater screens everywhere.

Design & Layout: Luis Ramos

"I wrote a script that surprised everyone involved, Marvel and New Line included," says Goyer, whose *Blade* script is scheduled for a big-budget production.

Art: Jim Steranko



Fox TV may soon become the home of World War II Howling Commando turned modern superspy Nick Fury.

Moviegoers will get to see the new Ghost Rider's most impressive tricks. "He'll have a computer-generated flaming skull, and the penance stare *is* in the movie," Goyer proclaims. "There's a visual computer effect where you'll actually see light come out of his eyes and we'll do a subjective montage of whomever his victim is, with their sins coming back to haunt them. He then leaves them in a vegetative state, sobbing and crying.

"I think my *Ghost Rider* script captures the character lock, shock and barrel. 'When innocent blood has been spilled, vengeance!' " quotes Goyer. " 'Look into my eyes, mortal, and feel the pain of my penance stare!' It's all there."

Gone from the story is Mephisto. Instead, the demon is Zarathos, an evil force who was the first Ghost Rider, now a separate entity who is the Ghost Rider's enemy. In Goyer's story, they've been at war with each other since the beginning of time, but they need human hosts in order to walk among mankind. Blaze is the Ghost Rider's human host and Zarathos gets one as well.

"Another thing I've done, which, oddly enough, they've implied recently in the comics," says Goyer, "is we have a prologue that takes place in the 1800s and shows that there have been previous Ghost Riders. There's a Ghost Rider on horseback who has a Colt peacemaker that shoots hellfire and who rides a skeletal horse!

"Caretaker [the comics' mystical gravedigger] is also in it. I wanted a mentor for the hero and I liked the character. The film begins in New Orleans, where he's caretaker of a cemetery. The Quentin Carnival, for which Blaze is a stunt rider, is in New Orleans. The prologue is a voodoo ceremony trying to bring Zarathos over in Bayou St. John when the old Ghost Rider shows up on horseback. He's one of Johnny Blaze's ancestors, Ethan Blaze. I liked a *Blaze* mini-series that said John is a magnet for the supernatural. I say that 'Every Blaze, going back to the beginning of their bloodline, has had that ability.' He comes from bad blood. The rest of the film takes place in New York."

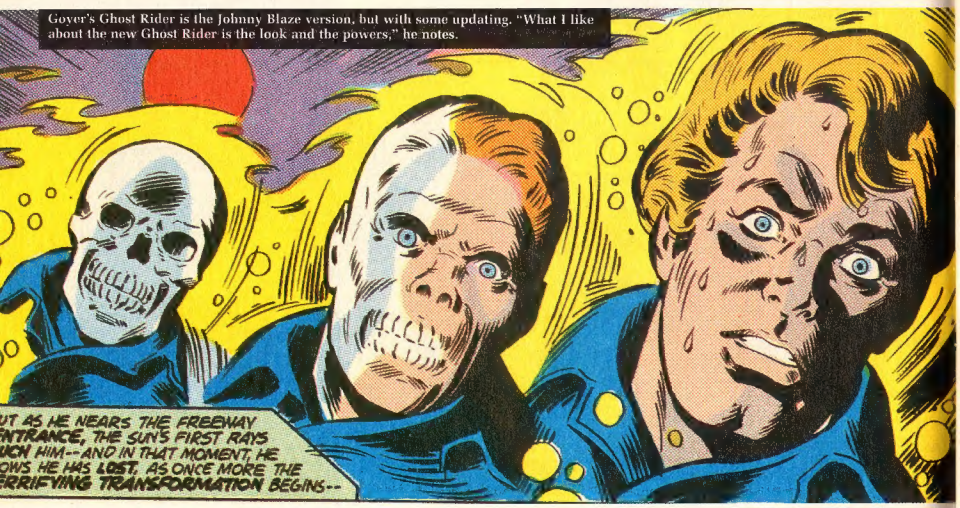
Like many other adaptations, *Ghost Rider* is an origin story. John Blaze doesn't become Ghost Rider until 25 minutes into the movie. "I like origins," Goyer notes. "Many nasty things happen to John Blaze before he becomes Ghost Rider; he really gets put through the wringer. The scene where he becomes Ghost Rider is my favorite—it's in New Orleans with Caretaker. I say in the script, 'There are many different ways to conjure a spirit,' so Caretaker brings Blaze to the mythical Crossroads—where [legendary Blues musician] Robert Johnson sold his soul.

"In mythology, anything that represents a transition is considered magical, such as midnight or a fork in the road. I chose the Crossroads because Ghost Rider is a spirit of the highways and has to be conjured. Caretaker puts Blaze in a pentagram and says, 'Whatever you do, once you're in a pentagram, you can't leave it until the spell is finished.'

"There's a supersonic scream over the nighttime horizon, the wind picks up and Blaze sees this amorphous, wraithlike form racing at him like a comet. It's coming and Blaze is standing there in the middle of the road waiting for this thing to enter his body.

"Caretaker screams over the wind, 'One more thing I forgot, Blaze—this is

Goyer's Ghost Rider is the Johnny Blaze version, but with some updating. "What I like about the new Ghost Rider is the look and the powers," he notes.


UT AS HE NEARS THE FREEWAY
NTRANCE, THE SUN'S FIRST RAYS
ICH HIM--AND IN THAT MOMENT, HE
OWS HE HAS LOST, AS ONCE MORE THE
RRIFYING TRANSFORMATION BEGINS--

Art: Jim Mooney/John Tartaglione

Art: Douglas H. Wheatley/Steve Moncuse

Deacon Frost, Blade's nemesis in the comics, is the heavy in Goyer's script; he believes vampires are a master race born to dominate humans..

gonna hurt a little!' Blaze almost steps out of the pentagram, says, 'Now you tell me?' and wham! This thing hits him and knocks him back 100 feet. There's a streak of smoke and burning asphalt ending in a crater. Caretaker comes running when out of the crater comes the Ghost Rider."

After writing the *Ghost Rider* screenplay, Goyer picked up a hobby. "I never rode motorcycles before *Ghost Rider*, but I got into Harleys because of it. Ghost Rider rides 'a quarter ton of Milwaukee road iron supported by wheels of hellfire,' " he notes, quoting from his own work. "*Ghost Rider* is very Sam Raimi-like. He has expressed interest in seeing the script. I would love for Sam to do it, so we'll see."

The first Marvel character Goyer adapted was Blade, the obsessed vampire killer who happens to be half-vampire himself. His version of the character followed a previous unfilmed project scripted by Lee Goldberg & William Rabkin (CS #46). "New Line Cinema had bought the rights to *Blade* and he had always been a character I kind of liked. [Spike Lee's cinematographer-turned-director] Ernest Dickerson was attached to direct and they had a cattle call for *Blade* writers, so I went back again and again. I don't know how many meetings, but I got the job because I really knew what I wanted to do with Blade.

"Initially, when people heard I was doing *Blade*, they thought it was going to be more tongue-in-cheek—'Shaft with a stake' is what they said. But what I wanted to do was take *Blade* in a real dark, serious, Wagnerian direction. I wanted to do an epic horror movie.

"I wrote a script that surprised everyone involved, Marvel and New Line included. New Line was originally thinking of doing an $8 to $12 million movie, but they've now decided, at the very least, that it's a $20 to $30 million project. It became a much bigger film. They're trying to work out a deal with Wesley Snipes. He wants to do it. Laurence Fishburne is also interested. Either of them would be great."

Goyer's story for *Blade* is a gritty view of the hardened vampire killer. "I think it's the best script I've ever written," he professes. "I liked the comic because Blade was so over the edge; in the script, I said that Blade 'came out of the womb screaming and never stopped!'

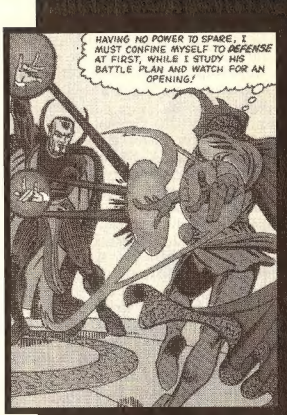
"He hates vampires because his humanity has been robbed from him. In the script, people may not know he isn't fully human, but they subconsciously sense it, so he has been alone his whole life. He has 'the thirst,' but he takes a human hemoglobin substitute, like a diabetic. He doesn't want to build any lasting relationships because he's obviously afraid of what might happen.

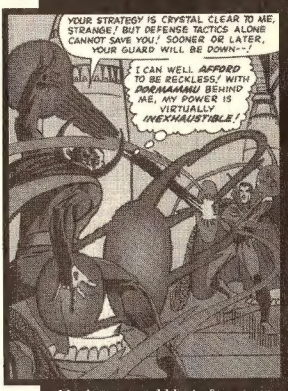
"It isn't an origin story," Goyer emphasizes. "The movie begins in a vampire speakeasy called The Bucket of Blood. This guy brings his date there. At midnight, the ceiling opens and they lower a man on chains, with his mouth taped shut, and everyone feeds on him. The date is human and she didn't know these people are vampires or that she's the dessert, or 'palate cleanser.'

"They start playing around with her and she gets knocked down. She lands at the foot of somebody who's way back in the shadows. He steps out, takes off his hat and cloak. It's Blade. He proceeds to kill 100 vampires in this incredibly bloody opening scene, with one revelation after another. First, there are vampires and now something *worse* than vampires—Blade.

"He's one step further to the right of Batman. He's psychotic and hellbent to get the vampires. I wanted a hero that audiences would be afraid of. The script has a Sam Peckinpah feel to it. Blade really is half-human/half-vampire. I wanted to deal with a man caught between both worlds, who is neither human nor vampire."

As in the comic, the film speculates that America is infested with a vampire underground. "The vampires are about to wage a holy war on the human race. After this bloody apocalypse, they're going to take over. The trigger for this event is the resurrection of the Vampire King—who can't be Dracula because of rights. He's La Mogra, basically a Varney the Vampire type who last walked this world 1,000 years ago. Once he's resurrected, vampires will come out of the shadows. It all takes place in 1999.

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I CAN WELL AFFORD TO BE RECKLESS,' WITH DORMAMMU BEHIND ME, MY POWER IS VIRTUALLY INEXHAUSTIBLE!

Art: Steve Ditko

Moviegoers could be in for a treat now that computer FX have finally caught up to the vivid imagination of original *Dr. Strange* artist Steve Ditko.

"Blade's comic-book nemesis, Deacon Frost, is the main villain. We wanted to play around with it, so he's not the old Christopher Lee type he was. Frost is more of a punk and a racial supremacist. He believes vampires are the master race and refers to humans as 'cattle on their way to the slaughterhouse.'

"I wanted a villain who's as passionate about what he does as Blade is. He really believes he's leading his race to glory. They want Blade because Blade is a hybrid. Normally, vampires and humans can't reproduce, but Blade has all of the vampire strengths with none of their weaknesses. Sunlight doesn't

Ghost Rider, Blade, Dr. Strange, Nick Fury & Associated Characters: Trademark & Copyright 1965, 1966, 1967, 1973, 1994 Marvel Entertainment Group, Inc.

affect him, but he does have 'the thirst.' Deacon Frost wants Blade because, in the film, Frost heads a pharmaceutical empire and wants to use Blade as a template to cure vampires of their sunlight affliction."

Adding to the mythos, Goyer created a mentor for Blade, an older vampire hunter named Whistler. "He's an 80-year-old Burgess Meredith type," the writer explains. "He gave Blade his sword. Whistler is the weaponsmith; he creates all the weapons and Blade does all the dirty work. Whistler found Blade when he was 13, living on the streets. In the script, his thirst didn't manifest itself until puberty.

"Whistler realized what Blade was and took him in. Recognizing Blade's unique abilities and knowing that he wasn't getting any younger, he groomed Blade as his replacement. The sword Blade uses was Whistler's, and has been passed down from one vampire hunter to the next for generations. That sword had been used to kill the Vampire King 1,000 years ago. Now, it has been passed to Blade and when the Vampire King is resurrected, he'll use it to kill him again."

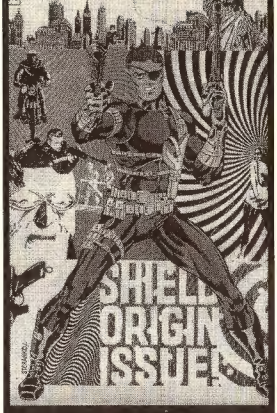
Blade now has a whole arsenal of weapons. "He's even more hi-tech than in the comics," Goyer boasts. "He has silver-plated hollow-point bullets filled with garlic paste. I say in the script that it's specifically the ultraviolet spectrum of sunlight that hurts vampires, so he has UV entry lights on his gun. There's a scene where he interrogates a vampire under a sun lamp. Blade has a whole bag of tricks, like a CO^2-powered dart gun filled with silver nitrate which works like poison on a vampire, from the inside out."

In designing Blade for his first appearances in the classic *Tomb of Dracula*, written by Marv Wolfman, artist Gene Colan gave him interesting details like a stake bandoleer and yellow wraparound glasses. "He has the glasses because his eyes don't look human," Goyer explains. "We don't know *what* he is until halfway through the movie. He's obviously a little more than human; he's slightly stronger and heals faster. There's a big revelation with a woman where he takes off his glasses and his pupils don't look human. His eyes are sensitive to light, but he can go out in the Sun."

Goyer is hopeful of the project's success. "I'm friends with director Ernest Dickerson and we're trying to see if he can work out the Wesley Snipes deal—he has worked with Wesley three times. Ernest is a huge horror fan [who helmed *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight* and was director of photography on *Tales from the Darkside*]. He knows his horror.

"Between the two of us, Ernest and I have seen every vampire movie ever filmed. We want to subvert peoples' expectations about vampires, so we have Deacon Frost appear in the sunlight. Because Frost is a pharmaceuticals magnate, he has developed an *uber* sunblock."

The *Blade* script's popularity led directly to other assignments. "Stan Lee and Avi Arad called me in to meet with them. They liked the fact that I was familiar with Marvel characters and wanted to know if I would be interested in doing something else. I said, 'I would love to do Dr. Strange,' but at the time [writer/director] Wes Craven was gonna do it, so they said, 'Would you like to do Ghost Rider?' I said, 'Sure, why not?' It was a real blast to adapt and write some of the comics I read as a kid."



"I want to be true to the character. Fury will have the eyepatch, Life Model Decoys and the S.H.I.E.L.D. heli-carrier," promises Goyer.

Art: Jim Steranko

Goyer's love for Marvel heroes is evident in his approach to the movies. "It's fortunate that I'm doing these adaptations because I throw in a lot of the Marvel lore that I think would pass by your normal screenwriter," he laughs. "There are many small, incidental things that Marvel fans will recognize, character names and references.

"What I do anytime I'm going to adapt a comic is I take the series, be it *Tomb of Dracula* or *Ghost Rider*, and I read the entire run all the way through. I determine what the origin is, whether I have to update it, and then try to figure, 'What's the central theme running through this story?' Who's the main villain—it's not always so obvious. Then, it's like a treasure hunt; I can pick and choose little moments, lines or some cool thing an artist did, from the entire run, and put it in my script.

"If some other writer were to adapt *Ghost Rider*, they might only recompile the *Ghost Rider: Reborn* graphic novel, whereas my script will have little tidbits from every appearance."

As Goyer has scripted three adaptations of Marvel characters, does he have any desire to actually write the comics? "I would try my hand at it, maybe once," he speculates. "If they offer, sure."

One of his strengths when it comes to adapting comics is his respect for the material. "There's a lot of excellent work in comics. I don't regard it as a bastard medium. There are comics that are as good as any other movies or literature. Alan Moore is a flat-out brilliant writer and *Watchmen* is better than 90% of the legitimate fiction out there."

After writing professionally for six years, Goyer's own origin is simple. "I was bitten by a radioactive spider," he jokes. "Actually, I'm from Ann Arbor, Michigan. I was introverted and bookish as a kid and would go down to the Eye of Agamotto comic shop every week from the time I was in the fourth grade! The Eye of Agamotto was a near-legendary place, the *only* comic shop in the University of Michigan.

"I'm a comic-book fanatic and have

Big-time action star Wesley Snipes may soon be wearing the familiar Blade goggles; Goyer and director Ernest Dickerson hope to sign him for the role.

Art: Gene Colan/Tom Palmer

10,000 comics! My mother, to her credit, never discouraged my brother and me from reading comics. She said, 'It's so natural that you would write comic-book movies. They couldn't find someone better suited for the job!' "

Goyer's career began after a chance encounter with Lawrence Kasdan, the writer behind *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *The Empire Strikes Back* (STARLOG #49). "He's indirectly the reason I'm out here," the writer reveals. "He came back to the University of Michigan to speak and I snuck in. I talked to him afterwards and he said, 'My advice to you is to get out of Michigan, go to LA or New York. If you want to accelerate things, go to one of the film schools and just be in the milieu. You can skip some of the years that I wasted in advertising.'

"I went to USC and later wrote a script, which became Jean-Claude Van Damme's *Death Warrant*. That got my career going. Suddenly, I was a young 'action writer,' doing low-budget action films [like *Kickboxer 2*] and some ghostwriting on Steven Seagal's *On Deadly Ground* and *Pet Sematary II*.

"Also, I wrote *Demonic Toys*," he confesses with a laugh. "I wrote it in three days! I read in *Time* magazine that *Demonic Toys* was the most popular movie in Chino [a prison holding some of California's most notorious felons]. When the warden decided that the prisoners there couldn't watch *Demonic Toys* anymore, they actually had a mini-riot! I was proud of that!

"They had the title and poster before I wrote the script. I almost directed it, but I decided if I'm going to direct some movie for $800,000, I would rather it be *sex, lies and videotape* than *Demonic Toys*! I wrote that and *Arcade* in my low-budget phase."

Ambivalent about his recent film, *Robert A. Heinlein's The Puppet Masters*, Goyer says, "It was an odd movie for Disney to make and I think they always felt uncomfortable with it. On one hand, they really wanted *ALIEN*, but I don't know if they were fully committed to making an *ALIEN*, both financially and in terms of grit. There were people at Hollywood Pictures who wanted to derail it.

"Even though I rewrote Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio on *Puppet Masters*, we're good friends. If there's a major difference between my writing and Ted and Terry's, I would say mine's meaner. The movie is not nearly as mean. It's kind of nasty, but I like my scary movies to be *really* scary. There were definitely scenes I wasn't allowed to do; scenes were cut because they were too scary.

"I wanted to do more with the kids. We had a scene where a four-year old guns down a bunch of soldiers and [then-Disney head] Jeffrey Katzenberg said, 'No way!' We had a scene where a 60-year-old woman gets one of these creatures on her back. Once these things are on you, they increase your adrenalin production so that you're stronger. This old woman is doing absolutely horrendous things like breaking peoples' necks. I don't think we got to explore as much as we wanted to and it's obvious in the last act that we really got hit on the budget. We did not have a set budget until two or three weeks into filming."

The *Ghost Rider* movie will feature the character's origin. "Many nasty things happen to John Blaze before he becomes Ghost Rider," notes Goyer.

Art: Salvador Larroca/Sergio Mehla

Goyer's leap into comic-book movies came when "I got bored with action and wanted to do genre stuff," he explains. "I got a rep for doing hard science fiction in a James Cameron vein. In this last year, I've segued more into comics projects. This year, my biggest gripe with my work in Development Hell is that my scripts were always being toned down. With Marvel Comics stuff, I can indulge myself as much as I want—demons, flaming skulls, everything I like," he chuckles. "I can get crazy to my heart's content.

"Peter Lenkov, who also wrote *Demolition Man*, was a producer of a project of mine at Universal. It was based on the comic *Alias*, which only ran four issues before being cancelled. It was just a kernel of an idea, we did not even know where they were going with it. *Alias* is a cautionary tale about a serial killer who finds his victims through computer bulletin boards. It's like *Silence of the Lambs* meets *WarGames*. It became my showpiece script and I got involved with comics-related films through that. *Alias* got me *Blade*."

Goyer is excited about his next project—bringing the Sorcerer Supreme created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko to the big screen. "*Dr. Strange* freed up while I was working on *Ghost Rider*. Wes Craven left the project. I don't know why, but," he smiles, "his misfortune is my fortune! Avi, Stan and I went to Columbia and pitched the classic Dr. Strange origin story—surgeon, hubris, hands disfigured, goes to Tibet.

"Then, *The Shadow* came out. The origin in *The Shadow* was cribbed from *Dr. Strange*, or who knows, maybe *Dr. Strange* cribbed from *Shadow*, it was very similar. So, Columbia didn't want an origin story, they wanted a movie where he was Dr. Strange from the beginning. That way, Stephen Strange would be more enigmatic and scary.

"One thing Columbia wants to do—which I thought was a little ballsy, given that Dr. Strange is such a staple on the Marvel roster—they want to make it R-rated! They want it to be a really scary horror movie. The studio kept saying, 'We want an adult *Nightmare on Elm Street*.' I thought, 'If there's any Marvel character who could go in that direction, it's Dr. Strange.' We reconfigured our story and came back with one that's more mature.

"Clea isn't in this story and I don't know if Dormmamu will be in it or not. Mordo is the villain. The Dread Dormmamu was in the first pitch. The goal was to bring Dormmamu over into

to our world, almost like John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness*.

"With Dr. Strange, we always talk about the seen and the unseen," reports Goyer. "One thing that I always liked about Dr. Strange is how he uses this spell of forgetfulness because he always sees things that other people can't. We became intrigued with the idea that there's our world and a hidden world which few people can actually see. People from that hidden world actually walk amongst us. You may not know it, but you may be sitting next to a demon in human guise.

"We decided that Dr. Strange is Earth's first line of defense against the unseen. He's the guy who can see all this, but consequently he's a lonely man, because the world can never know that he's saving them. Should anyone see what they shouldn't see, he must make them forget. The Sorcerer Supreme is a very powerful and lonely position, so we wanted to tell a love story.

"Because he's Dr. Strange, he has distanced himself from humanity. His love interest is a female homicide detective who, because she deals with a different type of horror, is also distanced from humanity. These two regain their humanity and fall in love. She's the ultimate cynic and ends up seeing his world. The tragedy is that, after they've fallen in love, he must make her forget. I think *Dr. Strange* is going to surprise people."

The good doctor will also be undergoing some renovations. "We're losing the mustache and giving Strange long hair, but his grey temples and Wong [Strange's manservant] are both there. I don't want to give too much away, but I will say that I've met with the Marvel editors in New York and my take on Strange is very similar to the new Strange in the comics. They're giving Strange a new look—I've seen it and like it a lot.

"He's Stephen Strange in the film, a surgeon who's very haughty and ruins his hands, but his powers are a little different and his look is different. The Eye of Agamotto is still there, but now it can change shape. The eye ties into the whole seen and unseen because it has the light of truth and can see; other people can use it to see the unseen, even pedestrians."

The comics' spiritual plane will also be used. "There's a scene where Strange gets shot and has to possess a woman and have her perform surgery on him. I wanted a scene where he has to do surgery but can't use his own hands because the nerves have been damaged. I reread all the old Lee/Ditko stuff and used some of the rules," the writer states. "If he leaves his body for more than 24 hours, he forfeits it.

"Morgana Blessing is also in the movie, in a reconfigured way. She's only 16 now. As in the comic, Morgana has the ability to see the unseen world. Because Strange is the Sorcerer Supreme, he's keeper of all these mystic talismans, both good and bad. He's in possession of the Darkhold, which is a bad one. It's almost like a gun. He's trying to prevent people from using it.

"Mordo wants the Darkhold—which was created by a demon and transcribed by Morgan Le Fay—and the deal with the Darkhold is that nobody can read it. It's garbled and there's only one person at any given time on the planet who can read it and that's the living reincarnation of Morgan Le Fey—Morgana Blessing. Mordo needs her to read the book.

"In the movie's beginning, Morgana is brought to Dr. Strange when he's still a doctor. She's blind. Dr. Strange can operate and cure her, but her insurance won't fully cover it so he turns her away. The decision comes back to haunt him, because now this girl is being pursued by Mordo and all the minions of Hell, and in some ways it's Strange's fault. So it's a redemptive story. Strange and this homicide detective try to stop Mordo from getting the book and the girl. Of course, Mordo gets both."

Nick Fury will tangle with the hordes of Hydra in Goyer's proposed pilot film, so there's bound to be plenty of flat-out action.

HEY! WHAT THE—?
NO NEED FOR YOU TO BE SNIV-SNIVELIN', NICK FURY IS NEVER BEEN ONE TO PLAY FAVORITES!
YEA, SNAPPY DIALOGUE IN GOT "HERE YOU'LL NOTICE" WRITES YOUR NATIONAL SOUPY SALES?
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WATCH CLOSE NOW CHARLIE! HERE'S A JUDO TOSS I THINK WILL REALLY GRAB 'IM!
KRUNCH!
UGGGHHH!!
Art: Jim Steranko

Readers will be happy to know that the Doctor keeps his Greenwich Village Sanctum Sanctorum. "When I was in New York, I went to the Village," the screenwriter says. "Strange is gonna live on Bleecker Street. Much of the film takes place in SoHo and the Village.

"Dr. Strange only has one set of clothes, which never leave his body, they just morph into whatever he needs. If he wants to be naked, they fuse into him and sink beneath the surface of his flesh. They're part of him. I always liked the split panels in the comic where you would see his cloak in one half and a business suit in another. They can change into normal clothes.

"Wong isn't going to be so servile. The Ancient One always knew Strange would become his successor, it was just a matter of time before he came around. Because Strange is so conceited in the opening, Wong thought Strange was unworthy of being the Sorcerer Supreme, so they chafe at the bit. In the movie, Strange has to prove himself to Wong. My vision of Wong is now more like Jet Li [star of numerous Hong Kong action films]. That's who Wong should be. I don't want to do the classic kind of 'Asian manservant' thing; it's a little dated.

"With *Dr. Strange*, Marvel didn't have to send me any comics—I own them all," Goyer admits. "I've always had a love for Dr. Strange, and my favorite run was under writer Roger Stern."

One highlight of doing these three superheroic screenplays was meeting with Marvel's main man. "Stan Lee just amazes me," Goyer states happily. "I talk to him fairly often, but the first time I met him, I couldn't get over the fact that I was sitting in a room with Stan Lee! To be able to work with him is so amazing.

"I was so reticent, in the beginning of our working relationship, to say, 'Well, this might have to be updated or changed,' and Stan is the first person to say, 'That won't play anymore,' or 'Technology has changed.' Sometimes, Stan even says, 'That may not have been the best conceived origin. We can do a better job.' I was amazed because I was really hesitant to say anything negative to the master.

"When adapting comics, you have to walk a thin line. It's important to stay true to the comic book, but it's a different medium and some things have to be updated. The *Batman* movies managed to get right the one thing I didn't think they would—the look and the tone. If

(continued on page 64)

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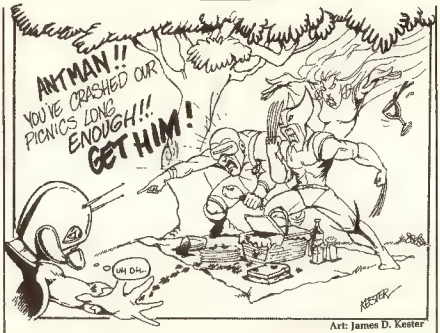


Art: James D. Kester

...There are now six major broadcast television networks. ABC, Fox, CBS and NBC are being joined by United Paramount and Time-Warner's WB Network. United Paramount's flagship series will be a *Star Trek* spin-off. As far as I know, WB has yet to develop such a franchise to anchor the network, so I would like to openly ask the WB executives to look to their sister company, DC Comics, for such a franchise. You could have five nights of live-action superhero adventures. It could be a dream come true, and since it is Warner Bros , the shows will be given a very fair chance to succeed—there will be no "if you're not a top 10 hit in five weeks you're cancelled" line.

For, say, Monday night, WB could reunite producers Danny Bilson and Paul DeMeo, John Wesley Shipp, Mark Hamill and David Cassidy, and revive *The Flash*. For Tuesday night, WB could contract the Bilson-DeMeo company to produce the *Shazam!!* series that I wished for in the letters page of CS #36. So, you have a straight adventure show on Mondays and a more outlandish, very visual show on Tuesdays, so for Wednesday nights they should go for a fantasy audience with a new *Wonder Woman* series starring former model and *Married...With Children* actress Teri Weigel in the title role. She looks the part, would fit in the costume very nicely and would be perfect in the role.

Now, Thursday nights could use a little romance, so WB could pick up *Lois and Clark* if ABC cancels it—and it looks like they will this season. I don't know if the show is getting better or if I'm just getting used to it, but I watch it every week and I would miss it if it got cancelled.

For Friday nights, they need something gritty, something dark. If *Batman Forever* flops at the box office, I urge WB not to throw in the cape, nor to crank out very bad, low-budget sequels, but instead to bring the Dark Knight "home" to prime-time network television. I urge—no, beg—WB to contract Steven Bochco (*Hill Street Blues*) to produce *The Batman*, using Frank Miller's *Year One* as a reference point, and parts of Steve Englehart's late '70s run of *Detective*, mostly for how to portray the villains, such as the Joker, the Penguin and corrupt politicians, like Boss Thorne. Return the Batman to a blue-and-grey lycra and leather outfit, with huge bat, *sans* yellow spread across his chest, and bulky military utility belt and tank like 1950 model Batmobile.

I could see Sasha Mitchell (*Dallas*, *Kickboxer*) as a tough and cool Batman, and a Cary Grant-esque Bruce Wayne. The other cast regulars should be Selina Kyle/Catwoman, adorned in her current purple and black comic outfit. Pamela Anderson would be purrrfect in the feline lead if she could be lured away from *Baywatch*. Dick Grayson/Robin, also in the current costume, should finally be cast correctly with a real 15-year-old, not some guy in his 20s pretending to be a teenager. Pat Hingle and Michael Gough would be welcome to reprise their roles as Commissioner Gordon and Alfred from the movies.

Harvey Dent should be played by a model type and the transformation to Two-Face should be the third-season finale. Cast semi-regulars would include Joker (Hugo E. Blick, young Jack Napier in *Batman*, would be perfect), Penguin (stick with the traditional version), Riddler (Mickey Dolenz is the perfect and *only* choice for this character), Boss Thorne, Vicki Vale, Harvey Bullock, Mayor Hill, and so on.

So I urge the Warner network to please make DC superheroes their cornerstone in primetime entertainment programming.

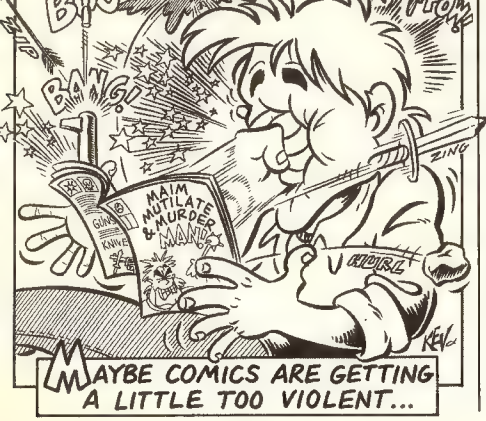
Lee Solomon
2839 Marlbank
Sterling Heights, MI 48310

*Readers should be aware that the WB Network has begun airing—*without *such superhero programming and, for the moment,* not *every night.*

...I recently read your interview with *Spider-Man* producer John Semper (CS #48). I can't believe that he would outright dis *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends* as "junk." You want to see junk? Check out *Beavis and Butt-head*, or *The Brothers Grunt*, which are supposed to be really hip, cool stuff for the '90s. I'm a college student who grew up on the show, and my career goal is to be a writer and producer of animated features *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends* was my biggest inspiration, and I can honestly say it's a part of who I am. I know that countless kids were introduced to the Spider-Man mythos through this show (as well as, indirectly, the X-Men). Despite whatever inconsistencies you can pick out of it, it was a very valid show for the '80s. It lasted for several seasons, so you would think it had *something* going for it. Would anybody nowadays call *Rocky and Bullwinkle* junk, despite its obvious low budget?

Sheesh, gimme a break.
Christopher Currie
11730 Yellowstone Street
Detroit, MI 48204

Art: Kevin Brockschmidt



...I can't believe that Turner Entertainment would halt production of *SWAT Kats*—especially when it was on the verge of becoming Hanna-Barbera's first mega-hit since *The Smurfs* back in the '80s!

Though no real reason was given for the show's cancellation ("not selling enough merchandise" isn't good enough for *me*, either!), one needed only to look at Animation Scene's photos from *A Flintstone Christmas Carol* and the forthcoming cornucopia of Cartoon Network shorts—as well as the revival of *Jonny Quest*—to find the answer.

If Turner Entertainment wants to continue living in (and cashing in on) Hanna-Barbera's past, more power to them. But if they lose *SWAT Kats* to another animation house (Film Roman, Nelvana, etc.) and it *does* become a mega-hit, the two companies (Turner Entertainment & Hanna-Barbera) will *really* be "kicking some tail"—namely, *their own*!

Kim "Kaemus" Schoonmaker
377 Dillon Road
Monticello, NY 12701

...I'm writing to respond to the likes of Mitchell Sapp, Jack White, a peculiar person who goes by "Name & Address Withheld," and, mostly, Lee Solomon, all of whose letters in issue #48 made up one of *the best* Lettering sections in COMICS SCENE ever! (The *Batman Returns* debates of issue #30 were also noteworthy.)

First, much respect goes out to Mitchell Sapp, whose COMICS SCREEN magazine idea is one of the finest suggestions I've heard from a reader in quite a while. I hope you, COMICS SCENE, give his idea some serious thought. I highly agree with Sapp that CS does not cover superhero and/or comic book movies nearly as much as I would like. I, too, flip right to the back to read Comics Screen the second I purchase a new issue, so a COMICS SCREEN magazine would be a choice concept.

The issues of COMICS SCREEN would not necessarily have to be skimpy, either. Just look at a typical Comics Screen section—there are hundreds of names listed on that page or two! COMICS SCREEN could tell us who these people are, and what their take on the comic book project is, etc. Think about it.

Now, Jack White. You say "Jim Carrey is NOT The Riddler. Mickey Dolenz is!" And "anyone with a brain can see that." Well, however good Mickey Dolenz might be in the role, I feel Jim Carrey will make a fine Riddler (a fitting replacement for Robin Williams). While I don't know for sure what kind of Riddler Mickey Dolenz would make, I feel that he cannot emit the same kind of energy that Carrey *or* Williams can.

I commented in issue #43 about how pleased I was that there was a movie based on *The Shadow* being made. I had waited a long time for this film, and taped the theatrical trailer (which I saw last January when I went to see *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*) off cable television and watched it repeatedly to build my excitement for the film (maybe I have too much free time). I was first in line on July 1 when it came to theaters.

Was I disappointed?

Well, yes and no. The film was great-looking, with outstanding sets, costumes and vehicles, but I had hoped that *The Shadow* would have the same epic feel that made the first *Batman* so outstanding. Both movies were budgeted at around $40 million, so why did *The Shadow* feel like it was on so much smaller of a scale than *Batman*? Different directors, different producers and different studios, I guess. So I let that slide.

I absolutely loathed the campiness of the film. My most hated line in the picture is when The Shadow retorts to the henchman, "Next time you get to be on top" after he has just fallen on top of him, killing the henchman. C'mon! If you have to have this dark, mysterious crimefighter make snappy comebacks, at least make them clever! I also have to admit that the story *did* get rather confusing and sloppy at times. Oh well, what did we expect? Russell Mulcahy *is* the same man who brought us the infinitely perplexing *Highlander 2: The Quickening*. In some of the scenes in *The Shadow* (namely the Shiwan Khan/taxi driver scene), it took me a minute or two to figure out that someone was being hypnotized, because there was nothing indicating this. I also agree with Lee Solomon that the fully costumed Shadow was not on the screen long enough. Why didn't they just call the film *Lamont Cranston*?

Anyway, believe it or not, after all my complaints, I thought *The Shadow* was, as "Name & Address Withheld" put it, "a damn fine movie." Aside from the film's few drawbacks, it does have some great scenes. The opening poppy fields scene is worthwhile. The bridge scene where The Shadow takes out Duke and his henchmen is a knockout, as well as the finale in the Hotel Monolith. Alec Baldwin, Penelope Ann Miller (she did look great in that dress!), Peter Boyle and John Lone all turned in honorable performances, but the two standouts (Jonathan Winters and Tim Curry) had the smallest roles in the movie! The picture needed more of those two. Shiwan Khan was a good villain, but I was hoping more for a Cagney-esque gangster as the main heavy (which would have drawn in the people who were fans of the radio show).

Overall, I thought *The Shadow* was a good movie, and I found it to be more satisfying than the nightmarish and incoherent *Batman Returns*. The Shadow is one of the best characters of all time and I hope *Return of the Shadow* will mark a triumphant return for the mysterious pulp novel figure. Maybe a sequel will get the recognition the first film didn't receive at the box office

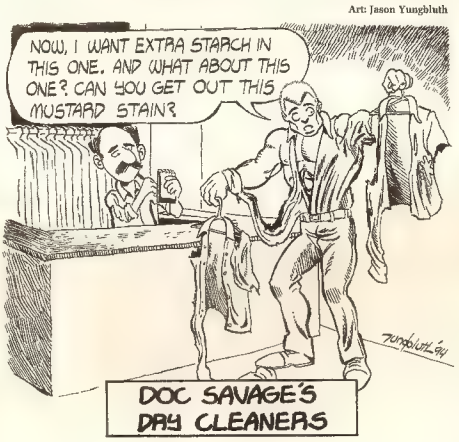
Getting back to *Batman Forever*, I agree with just about everything that Lee Solomon said in issue #48 about the upcoming sequel. My only problem with Val Kilmer replacing Michael Keaton is continuity. *Batman Returns* didn't *really* feel like a sequel to *Batman*, and now, with Keaton out, I just hope that *Batman Forever* doesn't feel even less. At least this movie still has Michael Gough (the perfectly cast Alfred Pennyworth) and Pat Hingle (another winner, as Commissioner Jim Gordon). Otherwise, I think Val Kilmer can make it work.

Jim Carrey (as you know), I have no problems with. Tommy Lee Jones will be outstanding! (But what happened to Billy Dee Williams??) As for Chris O'Donnell...well, I think Marlon Wayans would have been better (although he's getting up there in age now, too). Leonardo DiCaprio would have been better suited. I *am* opposed to the casting of Drew Barrymore and Debi Mazar as Leather and Lace/Sugar n' Spice (whichever it is). As long as they're just supporting characters, OK, but Two-Face and The Riddler are enough villains for me, thank you.

Joel Schumacher seems a rather odd choice to direct a *Batman* film to me, but I think he can pull it off. My personal choice to replace Tim Burton would have been Alex (*The Crow*) Proyas. Lee Solomon is right, *Batman Forever is* a crucial installment. After the second, I'm surprised a third is even getting made. But this is the one that can restore the public's interest in the *Batman* movies. If Schumacher can do it, great. But if he can't, I wouldn't be holding my breath for *Batman Triumphant*. Come what may, I can't wait 'til June!

James Ferace
P.O. Box 125
Ledyard, CT 06339

Art: Jason Youngbluth



We may never know what kind of Riddler Mickey Dolenz would make, but he is doing some nice voice work on Fox's very funny Tick *Saturday morning animated series.*

LIFE WITHOUT BATMAN

Batman Returns Photo: Trademark & Copyright 1992 DC Comics Inc.

Michael Keaton has no regrets about leaving the Dark Knight behind.

By DAN YAKIR & IAN SPELLING

Michael Keaton stood to make tens of millions of dollars in salary, profit participation and licensing revenues by heading back before the cameras for *Batman Forever*, which would have marked his third outing as the Dark Knight. Instead, after much contemplation, the actor elected to pass on the opportunity.

Why?

Part of it has to do with the fact that Keaton is in the enviable position of being able to financially afford to skip the latest *Batman* outing, as Val (*Tombstone*) Kilmer assumes Keaton's cowl and cape and Joel (*Flatliners*) Schumacher takes over the directorial duties from Tim Burton. "I'm very fortunate," says Keaton. "I didn't have to do it."

According to Keaton, he cut short his Dark Knight days because his character "was too closed-off. Talk about a closed-off guy," he blurts out. "Yikes! I had done it twice and I read the script for the third one and I didn't think it was all that satisfying or particularly rewarding this time around. So, I stopped.

"I had gotten to the point where I could see a whole lot of other things that I wanted to do. It became a question of, what do I really want to do with my life? What do I really want to do with my career? And when do I do these things? How important is it for me to do another *Batman* film right now? If I hadn't been satisfied with them, especially the first one, I might have said, 'Let me see if I can get this in here.' But I had done it twice and I thought the first time that I did it pretty well. And I wondered if I could be happier getting all these things in with a new *Batman* or without it. When I added it all up, my heart said, 'Not this time. It's time to move on.' There are too many other things to do."

In short, Keaton felt he was simply repeating himself in what was a "fairly dark character" that didn't allow too many acting challenges to filter in. "I liked what I did the first time," he emphasizes, "and I didn't make this [illegible], but that's exactly what keeps me excited. And I'm fortunate that it was not such a *huge* risk and that I'm OK and taken care of."

Indeed, Keaton is one of the few Hollywood leading men who's considered both a star and a character actor. He has proven his box-office clout in non-*Batman*-related vehicles such as *Beetlejuice* and *Mr. Mom*, and can now afford to pursue character-oriented projects.

According to Keaton, "the biggest pleasure about doing *Batman* was to act in something that was that large, that huge and that powerful. It was the whole feel, the whole spectacle, the whole event and to portray somebody who was so much larger than life. It was just great fun personally, and hard figuring out *how* to pull it off. *Batman Returns* I still liked, but it did not satisfy me as much."

The actor believes that the kind of movie he does depends on the need he feels personally and the need there is for such a project in the marketplace. A project done at the wrong time, he maintains, may backfire. "Sometimes you have to watch what you're doing if you want to continue to make movies. If I go off and do something that has such a huge imprint in people's minds that is really, really hard to take for a long time, it probably wouldn't be a smart thing to do, and I probably wouldn't need to do that." The reference to *Batman* sequels couldn't be clearer.

Although he denies having explained his decision to quit the *Batman* cycle as due to its excessive violence and darkness, Keaton admits that "I wanted to step out of being like this [shows a glum face]. I could have made Batman lighten up a bit, but I had done that kind of character already. The movie was knocked for violence, and I agree that there were violent moments in it, but that was cartoon violence. I wouldn't argue against violence in those movies, and not because I was in them. But it did get a little spooky for kids sometimes, especially in *Batman Returns*."

For Keaton, the more removed his character is from his real self, the greater the pleasure in bringing him to life. His roles in *Speechless*, as a political speechwriter; in *My Life*, as a man recording his life for his unborn son before dying of cancer; in *The Paper*, as an on-the-run journalist; and even in his debut, *Night Shift*, as a morgue worker-turned-pimp, are all "character" parts, but they are nonetheless closer to the actor's real-life persona, revealing mostly his zany sense of humor. "They are the more personal performances," he admits. "Those guys aren't all that different from me.

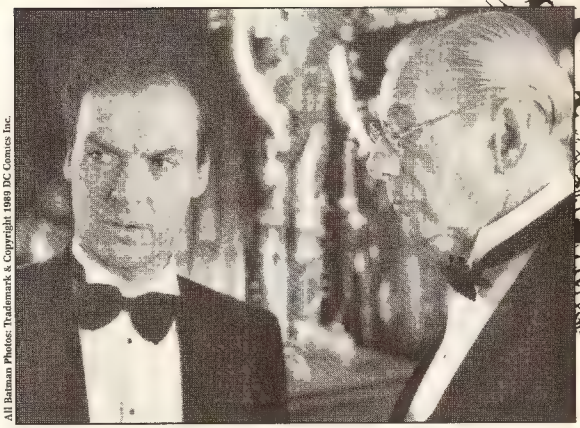
"But I prefer real distinct, different characters. It's probably what I do best. I'm just lucky enough to have this other thing going," he says cryptically, referring to his stardom, "otherwise I would have just been a character actor."

Batman was removed enough from the actor to qualify as a challenge, but Keaton doesn't fancy repetition. And as Keaton himself has evolved as a person and an actor, opening up—"staying open to let things in and out," as he puts it—and allowing the expression of greater vulnerability to become part of his existence, an essentially masked character like Batman seems like a relic of his past.

"I have an extremely fortunate job," he declares. "It requires you to ask questions in order to be able to play the role, so you end up getting to learn something all the time. I think it's therapeutic for many people. When I did *Clean and Sober*—I'm lucky and fortunate enough that I *don't* have any chemical addictions, but I had to find what it was in me, so I could relate on some level. So you have to ask yourself some questions and you learn something about yourself. It was a great shoot, but because we couldn't sustain the level of intensity the material required all the time, we would goof in-between, letting stuff out of our systems. In that sense, it might have been therapeutic."

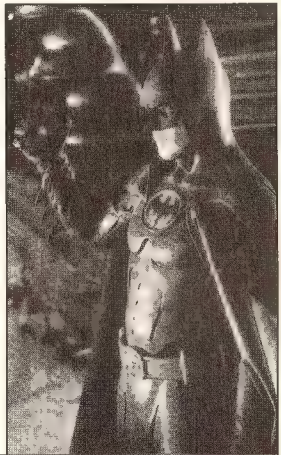
In the recent romantic comedy *Speechless*, Keaton acted alongside his *Beetlejuice* co-star Geena Davis and former *Superman* star Christopher Reeve. Although Keaton, who was filming *Speechless* when he made the decision not to do *Batman Forever*, reports that he and Reeve didn't exactly sit around chatting about superheroics, the irony of their backgrounds wasn't lost on him. "I can't think that these roles did anything but good stuff for both of us. Unfortunately for Chris," notes Keaton, "he hadn't done *any* movies yet when he did the first *Superman*. I wouldn't really have liked to have been in his position at all.

"*If* I were in his position, I'm not sure I would have done the second *Batman* movie. Actually, that's too easy to say. In fact, I probably *would* have done the second one," he laughs. "But that would have been scary. I was fortunate in that I had done a bunch of other movies before *Batman*. I had a foundation of other movies and a pretty wide variety of other roles that I had played. That's what made *Batman* work for me."



All Batman Photos: Trademark & Copyright 1989 DC Comics Inc.

Keaton wants fans—and butlers—to know he won't miss the Wayne family fortune. "I'm OK and taken care of," he says.



Design & Layout: Jim McLernon

Looking back on *Batman* and *Batman Returns* (which he discussed in CS #9 & #29), Keaton seems especially fond of the original film, in which he battled Jack Nicholson as the Joker. "I like them both. I really like the first one," he says. "Even though it had faults, there was nothing like that movie. Nobody expected it. It was artful and powerful, really powerful. The second one I liked, too, but I didn't like it as much as *Batman*. It was too... something. I don't know quite what. It just wasn't as satisfying."

Keaton will next be seen on the screen in *Multiplicity*, a film directed by Harold (*Groundhog Day*) Ramis and written by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel, who penned such hits as *Parenthood*, *City Slickers* and the Keaton vehicles *Night Shift* and *Gung Ho*. "I liked the combination of people and it's a real good idea. It's about a guy who doesn't have the time to do anything, not just to do the things he wants to do, but the things he *should* be doing," explains the actor. "I've gone through this many times, trying to be everything to everybody and trying to be something to myself. It's hard. It's about a guy who can't be everywhere he wants to be, so he gets himself cloned." CS

The actor felt he would merely be repeating himself if he once again took up the Dark Knight's cape and cowl.

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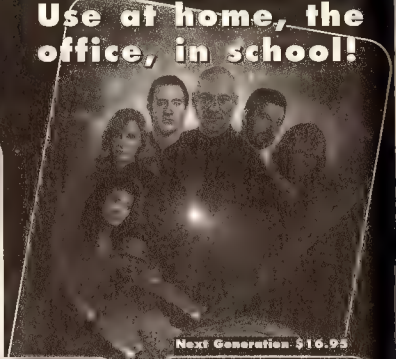

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DARK ANGEL

He's not the Batman anymore. Azrael struggles to discover his own identity.

By KIM HOWARD JOHNSON

Jean Paul Valley has said goodbye to Batman and hello again to *Azrael*, as he debuts in an ongoing monthly series from DC Comics.

After filling in for Bruce Wayne in the cape and cowl during the controversial "KnightsEnd" story arc, and walking away from it all at the saga's conclusion, Azrael is beginning to pick up the pieces in his very own book.

Providing the pencils is Barry (*Adventures of Superman*) Kitson, and scripting the title is longtime *Batman* editor Dennis O'Neil, who was responsible for penning some of the all-time great *Batman* stories. *Azrael* marks his return to writing a monthly series.

"I guess I was the logical choice to write the ongoing Azrael book, since I created the character," says O'Neil, who did the four-part 1992 *Batman: Sword of Azrael* mini-series that introduced Valley to comics readers.

Although Jean Paul gave up his Azrael uniform to replace Bruce Wayne in the Batman costume, O'Neil says there will be enormous differences between Batman and Azrael as he's portrayed in this new *Azrael* series.

"Most of those differences were highlighted before in 'Knightfall,'" explains O'Neil. "For the first year or so, *Azrael* will be a story about the making

YOU'RE HURT! BURNED!
NOT MUCH! IT'LL HEAL
WHAT DO YOU WANT? WHY ARE YOU HERE?
I APOLOGIZED YOU JEAN PAUL. I FORCED YOU TO BECOME THE BATMAN WITHOUT CONSIDERING WHAT THAT MIGHT DO TO YOU. WHEN IT NEARLY DESTROYED YOU, I SENT YOU ON YOUR OWN
YES?
YOU'VE GOT BIG PROBLEMS.
THE ORDER OF ST. DUMAS FILLED YOU WITH A TERRIBLE CAPACITY FOR VIOLENCE AND THEN BLOCKED YOUR MEMORY.
YOU DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE. WHERE YOU COME FROM. WHAT YOU'RE CAPABLE OF UNTIL YOU HAVE SOME ANSWERS. YOU CAN'T HAVE A LIFE

"Denny wrote stuff that got me into comics when I was a kid," says *Azrael* penciller Barry Kitson of working with veteran writer Denny O'Neil.

of a hero. When we first met Batman, he was full-grown, with heroic stature. One of the main differences is that Batman is fully conscious and volitional—he controls his own destiny. Poor Jean Paul is kind of a puppet; he doesn't know who or what is pulling his strings."

Azrael was originally a part of the Order of St. Dumas, and that mysterious, ancient sect will play a significant role in the ongoing series, as Jean Paul tries to forge his own identity. The new *Azrael* series begins as a quest for redemption or initiation, notes artist Kitson. "In some ways, it's almost like

All Azrael Art: Barry Kitson & James Pascoe

Jean Paul's quest for his own soul."

"The first six-issue story arc will be Jean Paul's attempt to discover who he is and what is controlling him," O'Neil reveals. "He's a very reluctant hero, and he goes on his quest because he learns you can't live a meaningful life not knowing who you are. He's also subject to sudden mental blackouts, after which he wakes up to discover bodies lying around him, and he doesn't know exactly how that happens or why.

"Jean Paul doesn't know what he's capable of, either for good or for bad.

"In the first issue, the foes he fights in his head are different from those he fights in reality," reveals Kitson of the unbalanced Azrael.

He's probably an athlete equal to or exceeding Batman, and yet he can't control that. He also has hidden pockets of rage implanted in him that he can't control, and he never knows what's going to trigger one."

O'Neil is discovering new challenges with *Azrael*, due to the very nature of the character himself. "My initial problem is to take a guy who's the *antithesis* of a hero, and give him heroic stature," says the writer. "It is by far the most difficult and interesting start-up I've ever tried. Usually, you start on square one, and we're starting up about four squares behind that!"

Kitson became involved with *Azrael* very early on, and agrees that this is a very different Azrael than the one in the "Knightfall" stories. "This book is fairly hard to describe. I think it's going to be unique among superhero books. It's more about personality and spiritual issues involving Azrael himself. He's on a search for himself, somewhat the same way as the Question was, but with more mystical, mythic overtones. Someone else described it as 'Dr. Strange meets Batman.' It has all the elements of the dark detective, but it also has a much more mythic, spiritual side without going into hocus pocus."

After Jean Paul traded his Azrael costume for the Batman suit in "Knightfall," he became increasingly violent until he went over the edge. Kitson maintains the violence in the ongoing series will be toned down. "There will be violence in it—not such gratuitous violence, but Azrael still gets taken over by the System," says Kitson.

"Poor Jean Paul is kind of a puppet; he doesn't know who or what is pulling his strings," notes O'Neil.

"When he's taken over by the System, he's not really even aware of the violence he's committing. Part of the book's drive is Azrael's attempts to become responsible for his own actions—can he come to terms with being trained as an assassin, programmed by someone else?

"There will be *other* Azraels in the series, and the Order of St. Dumas may decide that somebody else is better suited to the role than Jean Paul, with his obvious problems. Part of that is a comparison between Jean Paul, who's developing a bit of a conscience, as opposed to a guy who wants to be the assassin just because he wants to commit violent acts and is good at it. Jean Paul's undeniably good at it, but he's tempered by the fact that he doesn't particularly *want* to commit violent acts—although the side of him that did want to commit violence got let loose in the *Batman* stuff! He's beyond that now. There was a moment of redemption when the light hit him in the Batcave. I don't think he's going back to that, though I may be surprised come issue #5!"

Azrael has enormous potential, but what that will develop into has yet to be determined. "I wouldn't say he's a hero," notes Kitson. "He may become one. With issue #1,

Unlike the gritty urban reality of *Batman*, mysticism takes the foreground in *Azrael*, which has been described as "Dr. Strange meets Batman."

he's something of a lost soul with a great deal of power and capabilities within himself because of the System. He is extremely good at hurting people, and he's trying to find out what he is. Jean Paul's drive is to be a hero, but the series will show us whether that's going to be enough. In the first few issues, he doesn't know himself whether he even wants to be a hero—he just does not want to be messed up anymore. Part of his cure for himself is facing what he was, which obviously involves facing the Order. Denny has the whole year plotted out, and there are choices to be made for him in every issue.

"It's not quite like any other superhero book out there. *Azrael* is definitely a superhero book, but it isn't like anything else that I've ever read. It's going to be an interesting book."

The artist says he's thrilled to be pencilling O'Neil scripts. "I especially love working with Denny—I know it's a cliché he hears all the time, but Denny wrote stuff that got me into comics when I was a kid, and made me really want to draw comics."

O'Neil is using classical influences for the first story arc in an attempt to redefine his protagonist. "I'm using the classic quest story as my model or structure," he says. "Jean Paul has to get pointed in some direction, find out where to go. As per any good quest story, he picks up allies along the way, and he discovers who his enemies are, but he may not always be sure which is which; by the end, the protagonist has learned something and come back with a reward. Presumably, Jean Paul's reward will be an identity—who he is

Azrael & Related Characters: Copyright 1995 DC Comics Inc.

Photo courtesy DC Comics

"I think I just like doing scary stuff," admits Kitson, who is happy to be creating the shadowy, mystical world of Azrael.

and what he can do."

Most of Azrael's background is only now being developed for the monthly book. "I don't think a lot of this was in my mind two years ago," admits O'Neil. "In a sense, all storytelling is problem solving, and the problems we had to solve when we did *Sword of Azrael* were way different than the problems that you have to solve with an ongoing, open-ended book. Back then, I was setting up something to serve a larger storyline. We worked hard on making it solidly entertaining in its own right, and if you never read any issue of 'Knightfall,' I think that *Sword of Azrael* stands as a graphic novel. My primary task was always to tell a good story and entertain the readers and give 'em their money's worth. The other task with *Sword of Azrael* was to start to set up the conditions that would allow us to do 'Knightfall.'

"The problem I'm trying to solve now, using that as a point of departure or as one of the givens, is to create an interesting and different hero out of this raw material. I feel split about it—on the one hand, I want to say I've inherited this raw material, but on the other hand, I *created* a large part of what I'm inheriting. But I didn't create it with the idea of spinning off an ongoing series. It was always a possibility, but I wasn't sure until pretty close to when I started writing it."

O'Neil explains that expanding upon a character originally meant for one storyline starts with creating a broader, more elaborate origin story. "Instead of starting from scratch, it's a job of re-definition, and then we'll have to end up with, to use TV terms, a 'franchise,' some reason for him to continue to get involved in adventures. To some degree, it's a process, and right now I'm concentrating on the first pieces of the story, which make up a quest for his own identity. Barry and I talked a fair amount about this before I started it. Barry wanted some of the feel of the old *Question* series in it, which was a quest for identity that was structured very differently—not in terms of a journey, but in terms of Vic Sage not knowing who he was. Azrael is much, much closer to traditional superheroes, but near its core, it is really quite similar in that we have a character who's seeking himself."

Kitson believes *Azrael* may be somewhat more realistic than *Batman*, though he admits that everything's open to interpretation. "It all depends on what you call realistic,"

Design & Layout: Luis Ramos

says Kitson. "I would say he is, but then, there are an awful lot of overtones and undertones that Denny puts in, resonances concerning reality and the spiritual aspects of life—some people may say they are real, and other people may say they are totally unreal! Obviously, things like the Order of St. Dumas are completely fantastic, but the problems that Jean Paul is dealing with are probably more the problems that everyday people are dealing with in their heads, rather than the problems that Batman deals with in his head."

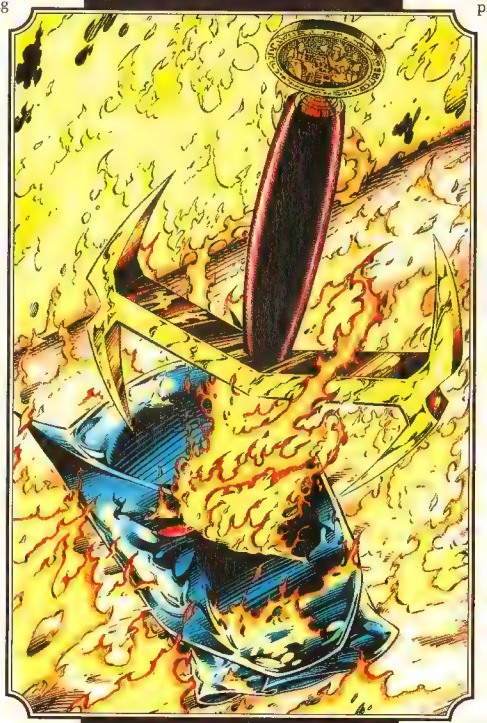
Azrael will be squaring off against equally extravagant antagonists, though O'Neil and Kitson are reluctant to call them "supervillains." "I'm uncomfortable with the term 'supervillains,' but there will be antagonists who are larger than life, and have larger-than-life powers and capabilities," says O'Neil. "I don't anticipate—at least for a long time—Jean Paul going after a gang of counterfeiters, hijackers or anything like that. But you can't tell!"

"In the first issue, the foes he fights in his head are different from those he fights in reality," explains Kitson. "The first foes he'll go up against are the Order of St. Dumas and the various factions within the Order. We just saw a glimpse of several characters in the first issue, and that's expanded a bit more in the second one. The Azrael candidate in the first issue becomes a darker version of our Azrael—he's the guy who enjoys the violence and *wants* to be the assassin."

Azrael is almost inextricably bound to the Batman, and his ongoing series will likewise be tied to the Batman family of comics. "They'll interact quite a lot, though in different stages," says Kitson. "To begin with, Batman is very instrumental in the direction that Azrael goes in, but part of that direction is to leave Gotham and head toward the order of St. Dumas. He'll come back to Gotham City, but exactly how soon that will be is in Denny's hands!"

O'Neil admits he isn't entirely sure about long-range plans for *Azrael*, but that's part of the territory when scripting comics. "One of the joys of doing a monthly book is that sometimes the book begins to lead you!" reveals O'Neil. "Things suggest themselves as you go along that you didn't start out with, that end up being very viable. As you go along, you find the avenues to explore."

The first story arc in *Azrael* will deal with Valley's attempt to find his own true identity apart from Batman.



"He picks up allies along the way, and he discovers who his enemies are, but he may not always be sure which is which," O'Neil points out.

Kitson, who also currently pencils *Batman: Shadow of the Bat*, recently left *Adventures of Superman* to pencil *Azrael*. He believes he's probably better suited to drawing darker, more complex heroes. "Batman was the character I wanted to draw ever since I was a little kid. When I was originally offered *Azrael*, I thought it would be the nearest I ever got to *Batman*, but as things turned out, I got offered the *Bat*-book as well! I think I'm an artist more naturally suited to the nuances of the darker side—I loved doing *Superman* and it was great fun, but I always felt like I was in other peoples' shoes. Other people do big people and smashed-up buildings so well that I always felt I was trailing along behind John Byrne and Dan Jurgens, whereas with these sort of books, I think there's stuff I can do with storytelling that nobody else has done. That was really the main attraction to me for wanting to pencil *Azrael*."

Both *Shadow of the Bat* and *Azrael* have their own distinctive identities, as well as many similarities. "They share the dark, mainly Gotham, setting, and they're more about real people with more flaws," says Kitson. "I guess they're a chance to play with the frailties of humanity more than straight superhero books, especially with titles like *Superman*, where everything is bigger than life. There's a lot more shadowplay stuff which I enjoy.

"In both *Azrael* and *Shadow of the Bat*, there seems to be more stuff where the way somebody stands in shadows can tell you more about what's going on than those big, grandiose gestures.

"I like figures that would make you jump backwards if you saw them in the dark, rather than rush forward to have them save you," says Barry Kitson. "I think I just like doing scary stuff!"

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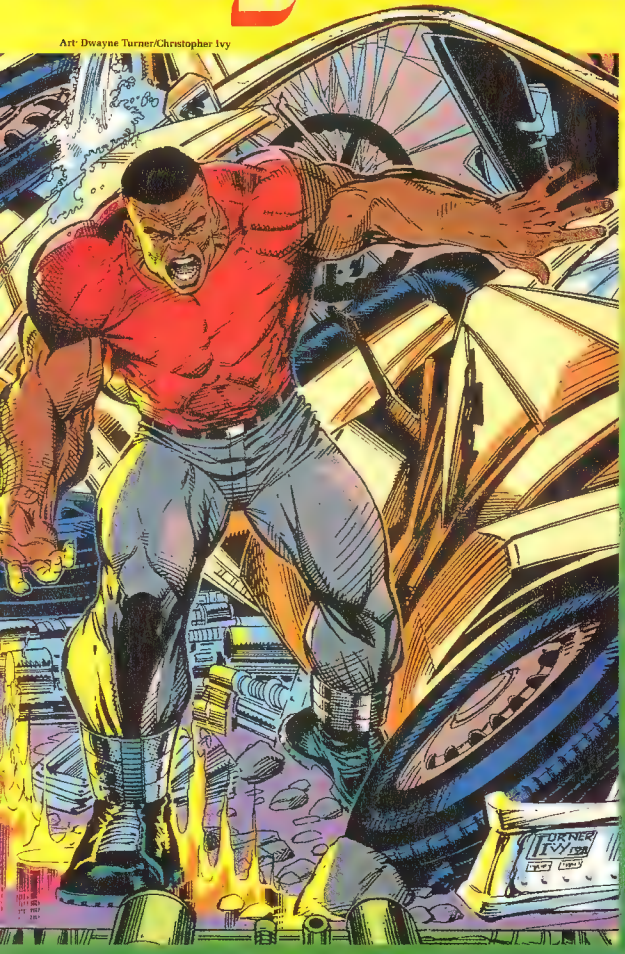
Hero for Hollywood

It's Luke Cage's turn to take on that most formidable foe—filmmakers.

By ANDY LEE



Art: Dwayne Turner/Christopher Ivy

Marvel Entertainment has big plans for Luke Cage—Ed Pressman, producer of *The Crow* and the upcoming *Judge Dredd*, is working on a film featuring the Marvel Comics character Luke Cage. Based on a script by Ron Friedman, the movie focuses on Cage's wrongful imprisonment, his acquisition of power through a scientific experiment, and his quest for vengeance.

In the comics, *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* has been a man out to clear his name as originally conceived by Archie Goodwin, a gritty, New York crime fighter as interpreted by Don McGregor, and a hi-tech action/adventure hero as written by Chris Claremont. In his latest comic-book incarnation, Cage is a hard-nosed, mercenary hero for the '90s as realized by Marc McLaurin. Friedman chose not to draw from Cage's comic book past. His Cage isn't really any of these guys.

Instead, the writer worked on the movie's storyline with Stan Lee, after the project had been through many false starts and stops. While many writers have given their own spin to Cage, Friedman's vision of Marvel's urban superhero is that of a classic literary character. "I was true to the spirit that Stan had tried to deliver, which was essentially a black Count of Monte Cristo," Friedman explains. "Cage is somebody who was really mistreated, abused and framed by terrible people and a terrible system and so was kept alive only by his desire for exoneration and revenge against those who had framed him.

"When in doubt, I always go back to Stan Lee's original conception of character and circumstance. Stan is a purist. He never fails to create or deliver a character who's *in extremis* for human reasons. It's not like someone just happens to be there. It's as if the character creates the destiny. Those kind of simple, elegant functions make a drama tick. Otherwise, you get a great many characters who are acting be-

cause the script says they have to, and there's nothing within the character that motivates the action."

According to Friedman, the *Luke Cage* film is "the story of someone who, in the process of growing up and learning about himself, finds himself, through circumstances not of his making, a different quantity. He's the same man, but he's not the same. In the process of growing and changing, he has received a kind of gift that is also a kind of curse –his unusual strength. He's yet another prisoner who volunteers for experimental testing in hopes of having his sentence reduced because his whole mission in life is to get out of that jail and avenge himself and reclaim, if possible, the woman he loves."

The parallels between Cage and the Count of Monte Cristo are evident in Friedman's view of the character

Photo: Courtesy Marvel Films Entertainment

With the help of Marvel Maestro Stan Lee, Ron Friedman is working to bring Luke Cage to the motion picture screen.

Art: Dwayne Turner/Christopher Ivy

Luke Cage & Related Characters: Trademark & Copyright 1972, 1992, 1994 Marvel Entertainment Group Inc.

"When I say, 'Count of Monte Cristo,' I mean that this is a man, unjustly accused, whose strength is turned against him, because the situation he's in is one which uses his strength to punish him. Just as the Count of Monte Cristo, Edmond Dantès, is unjustly accused of heinous crimes and sent to the Château d'If forever, thereby losing the woman he loves, his fortune and his future, the burning desire for revenge keeps him alive. This burning desire for revenge has to be modified in order for Dantès to survive in the Château d'If. Luckily, he's befriended by an old prisoner, who teaches him things that as a youth he didn't know about history and science. In the process, Dantès, the youth, becomes a mature man who can eat his revenge cold, rather than have the fiery revenge immediately.

"So, in much the same way, Luke Cage is somebody who, wrongly and unjustly accused, finds himself in a hellish prison that's so nightmarish and brutal it makes the *Shawshank Redemption* prison look like a summer camp."

But Cage's story does differ from Dumas' *Count*. "As in many tragic heroes, the source of strength is also a potential source of weakness. In Luke's case, he has the tendency to lose his temper and, in so doing, step over the edge. His strength, which is his strength of character, his courage, his fighting spirit, mitigates against him doing easy time in prison. There is no old prisoner there to soothe him and teach him. So, he takes a hell of a beating. But, the flame of vengeance is all

This bruiser may not bring to mind *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but that's exactly the model Friedman has used for his *Luke Cage* script.

that keeps him going until he's at the point where that's all that matters to him. Unlike Dantès, he has become almost a beast because of his brutalization."

In Friedman's script, Cage is led astray by a big brother type, who emerges as the film's main villain and the target of Cage's vengeance. "The villain has a stature of his own that makes him a wonderful counterpoint to Luke. As good a man as Luke is, this is as evil as this guy is. The idea is that he's someone whom everyone will recognize. He's like the big brother, though he's not Luke's brother. He's just a little bit older, a little bit smarter, someone who takes Luke as a kid under his wing to use him. The kid is so hungry for an older guy's attention that he doesn't realize that he's being used, because this guy is so charismatic. To me, this character is a metaphor for the gang. I think everybody will recognize the attraction of this character and how a good kid can become friendly with him, not dreaming for a minute that what he sees as this character's hard-nosed and undesirable traits would ever be turned against him. There's nothing preachy about this. It's a really gritty, recognizable, honest story, even though it goes into the fantasy of superheroism."

There's a universality about Cage's story. "What appeals to me about Cage is that he's the kind of character and it's the kind of story that everyone has within his heart," Friedman explains. "It's so basic to the human condition. We, each of us, envision ourselves at times in our lives as prisoners of our beginnings and as prisoners in our present lives. We're unable to change our direction, except by heroic means, and those means often elude us or prove too difficult. So, we must sit back and sigh, and relegate ourselves to 'doing time' in the way our lives are going at the moment. That's something that everyone responds to, in recognizing this kind of universal sense of imprisonment and loss of freedom by circumstance. Where somebody like the Count of Monte Cristo or Luke Cage actually can grow, and learn, and fight, and change that destiny, escape those bonds and be redeemed. It's a story of redemption."

While audiences may empathize with Cage's imprisonment, as a writer, Friedman appreciates the hero's human side. "Luke Cage is not a superhero with astonishing powers," the writer promises. "The powers that he has are certainly unique and superior ones, but they aren't as dramatic and profound as others. He doesn't fly. He can't melt steel beams. He *can* be killed. He does feel pain when bullets strike him or when he's crushed or hit. He suffers the injury, and yet he's able to recoup and to come back. He's not immune to pain and suffering. The extent to which he has gotten super-powers is not so great that it lifts him above the human condition. He still experiences all the things that a human being does."

Friedman also admires Cage's spirit and anticipates that Cage's story will engage moviegoers. "Audiences are going to want to know who, what, why and how this guy survives, because he's a unique and, in many ways, admirable figure. He has a vision of what his life should be like and he sets out to try to accomplish that. It's a good vision. He's a good man. The audience sees things go so wrong because he places his trust in the wrong people, because, in effect, he falls in love with the wrong woman at the wrong time. I really think that

Art: George Tuska

Friedman believes that the uniqueness of comics is that "your participation is devoutly requested and critical to the success of the interface."

even if this were an ordinary man's story, the audience would be engaged and watch it closely, and feel something for the character."

While Luke Cage may exist in the realm of superhero fantasy, his story also draws upon the viewpoint of the African-American experience. A writer often uses his own life to find the voices of his characters. In Friedman's case, he was able to draw upon a longtime involvement in civil rights. "I was heavily involved in civil rights before it was popular," Friedman says. "The idea of being colorblind is very much a part of my family tradition. My grandfather was active at the NAACP's beginning. He was one of the founders of the NAACP in Pittsburgh. He was an immigrant Jew from Russia, who believed

Photo: Copyright 1991 Warner Bros.

strongly in it. I took my beatings for trying to integrate bus station toilets in Oklahoma City. I've been there. I understand, because there was always a traditional bond between Jews and blacks that only in the last few years has been fragmented and frayed by many people whom I consider to be self-motivated rabble-rousers and demagogues. There's a kind of kinship that I have lived for all my life and there's a kind of identification. Part of the Jewish seder is to say, 'We were slaves in Egypt!' "

At one point, Friedman even met Malcolm X in New York. "It was a brief moment, but I *did* meet Malcolm X and he was not an angry man. He treated me like a good person."

Friedman defends his right to write from all perspectives. "I don't feel at all shy about writing from a black point-of-view, any more so than I do from a woman's point-of-view. Gustave Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary*, and nobody said, 'How can you write about a woman? You're a man.' By the same token, Jane Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* describing a father with six daughters to get rid of. How could she write about a man's point-of-view when she was a woman? This political correctness means that only a *dead* person can play a corpse on TV!"

While Cage's tale is that of an urban African-American, Friedman believes

Photo: Copyright 1993 Warner Bros.

Photo: Todd Gray/Courtesy Black Elegance

A "young Morgan Freeman" is Friedman's choice to play Luke Cage. Wesley Snipes, Laurence Fishburne and Denzel Washington (not pictured) are candidates.

his story transcends his surroundings. "I feel that I am an artist and I feel that I've earned the right to say that through a lot of effort over time. I feel that we, each of us, is all of us. There is a universality in the human condition that transcends color, background and history, and *that* is where people truly meet as fellow humans, who share a life together on this planet with some meaning, intensity, sense of purpose and kindness. It comes from the universality of the human condition, not its fragmentation. When you write about the universality of the human condition with the kinds of things, feelings, sensations, thoughts and experiences that cut through any differences, then you're dealing with the stuff of myth, of legend. Myth, legend, they have no color. They have no time. They're eternal. That's the kind of character Luke Cage is."

The film, intended to be a New Line Cinema release, is currently searching for a director. All writers envision certain actors bringing their characters to life. "Luke Cage is the kind of role that many good actors will be interested in. Because of Luke's age, it can't be Morgan Freeman, which is too bad, because he's fabulous. It could be Denzel Washington or Laurence Fishburne, who's just immense, or Wesley Snipes. There are a few up-and-coming people that I think have charisma."

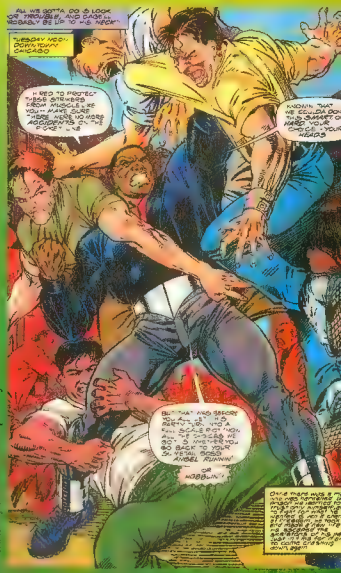
Comics readers may already be familiar with Friedman's work while unaware of his name. His script credits include *Fantasy Island*, *Vega$*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Charlie's Angels*, *All in the Family*, *The Odd Couple*, *Gilligan's Island*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *The Fall Guy*, *Chico and the Man* and *Bewitched*. He has also written material for Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Robert Goulet, Carol Channing, Dick Van Dyke and Bill Cosby. More relevant to the world of comics, Friedman developed *G.I. Joe* for television, was heavily involved in *The Transformers* and created *The Bionic Six* and *The Defenders of the Earth*. Currently, Friedman is *The Marvel Action Hour*'s supervising producer, bringing Iron Man and the Fantastic Four to animated life on television.

Friedman's professional association with comics was preceded by a lifelong interest in comic books and a belief in their worth. "Comics have a far greater reach into the collective unconscious than is generally considered," he opines. "Comics actually touch deeper and reach further than television does to those who read comics. They are far more likely to be moved and illuminated by their contact with the comic book, because it involves that kind of harnessing of imagination. That doesn't happen in a literal medium like film or television. There, your participation is not required in order to see Arnold Schwarzenegger smash a bad guy in the mouth. He's going to do that anyway.

"In a comic book, your participation is devoutly requested and critical to the success of the interface. You, as the reader, have to get into it. You have to let it reach into you. In that regard, you are more fragile. You are not as callous. The readers of comics *can* be touched. They can feel the parallels in their lives, the echoes with what's happening to their favorite characters, that they do not get, except superficially, in watching a sitcom or some action/adventure show on TV. Comics create a strong bond with the reader. That bond which is part imagination and part participatory is extraordinarily meaningful. I know people who have been moved by comics who would otherwise not have been reachable."

Friedman's association with comics doesn't end with Luke Cage. He will be working on further Marvel projects, although he can't disclose just which ones. As for his favorite Marvel characters, "I've always particularly enjoyed the Sub-Mariner. I find him to be the equivalent to Geronimo, an American Indian leader, in the sense of being torn

(continued on page 62)

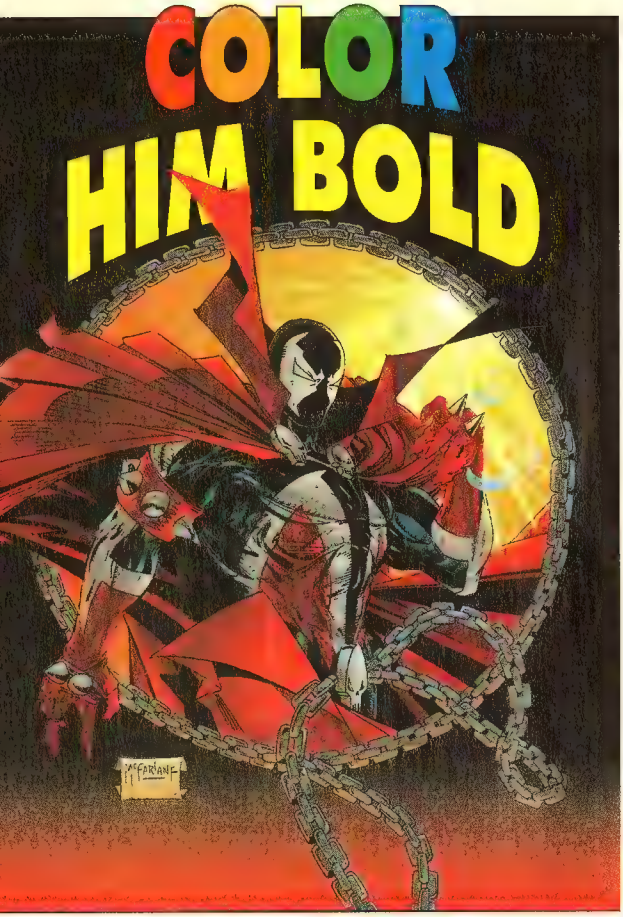

ALL WE GOTTA DO IS LOOK AT HOW BIG AND BAD HE BECAME TO BE LIKE HIM!
"BRONX HERO DOES IT AGAIN! CHICAGO
I RED TO PROTECT THOSE INNOCENTS FROM MUGGERS LIKE YOU--MAYBE SAVE THEM MORE TO WORK AGGRESSIVELY ON THE STREETS!
HMPH! "HE WOULDA DONE SOMETHING SMART'S MAKE YOUR HEAD HURT!
BE--HA! AND BECAUSE I'M SO BIG AND BAD, I'LL BE ABLE TO SMASH ANYONE WHO GETS IN MY WAY!
HOBBLE!
ONCE THERE WAS A MAN WHO WAS SO BIG AND BAD, HE COULDN'T EVEN FIT INTO HIS OWN SKIN! SO HE HAD TO WEAR HIS SKIN ON THE OUTSIDE OF HIS BODY!

Design & Layout: Freddy Collado

Art: Dwayne Turner/Christopher Ivy

"The flame of vengeance is all that keeps him going until he's at the point where that's all that matters to him," Friedman says of his hero.

COLOR HIM BOLD



Colorist Steve Oliff turned comic book color from flat to fantastic. Can he conquer animation too?

By DARCY SULLIVAN

Ask any comics fan or professional to name the medium's most influential people of the last 10 years, and you'll hear a list of familiar artists and writers, the usual Frank Millers and Alan Moores. You certainly *won't* hear Steve Oliff tossed in there with the big-timers.

Trouble is, that's where he belongs. As the man most responsible for bringing computer coloring into the field, Oliff has done more to change the *look* of comics than any modern hot *artiste*.

Sound like an idle boast? Slap your favorite Image comic down next to the Sunday newspaper funnies. Look how different the colors are between the two, and chalk that difference up to Oliff, the graduates of his company Olyoptics and those who've followed his lead.

Or skip the comparison and ask the experts. "I think he's the best in the business," Todd McFarlane allows. "Comic books are colored a little bit differently because of Steve."

"Steve broke the wall," praises Lovern Kindzierski, creative director of coloring house Digital Chameleon, the main rival to Oliff's Olyoptics firm. "He made publishers and editors aware that computers were a viable alternative, not a novelty. And he did such a fantastic job that people said, 'This is better on every count.' "

Along the way, Oliff helped advance the standing of colorists in the industry. "Now colorists have a chance to be really well-known," Oliff says, "which means people are paying more attention to the quality of their work."

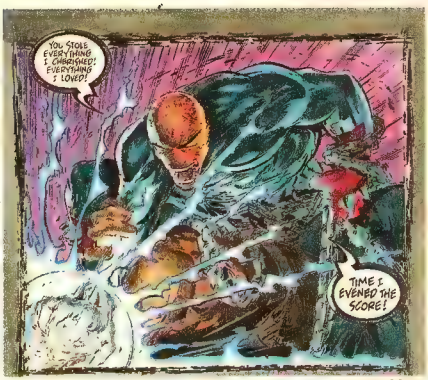
Having revolutionized comics coloring, Oliff has set his sights on a new line of work: animation. He has a few hi-tech tricks up his sleeve that could make his Magic Observatory project another breakthrough. But there's a downside: "If my plans work out," he says, "I *won't* be coloring as many comic books."

Why would Oliff want to leave coloring, which has been veddy veddy good to him? Maybe because it was never his chosen profession.

"I started out to be an artist," he explains. "It just worked out that I did color." That's partly because one of his early jobs in comics—coloring the Harlan Ellison story "Croatoan," illustrated by Tom Sutton and first published in *Heavy Metal* circa 1978—caught Howard Chaykin's eye.

"Howard flew me out to New York to color his adaptation of [Alfred Bester's] *The Stars, My Destination*," Oliff says. "Howard's partially colorblind—you would be surprised how

"I had a dream about comics having better color," says Olyoptics chief Steve Oliff. "Gradually, the color itself sold the computer-coloring process."



Selected Art & Color Guides: Courtesy Steve Oliff

Printed Art

"I think he's the best in the business," says *Spawn* creator Todd McFarlane of Oliff, who continues to color the series.

many comics artists are. I worked for $15 a day, which was very low pay, even then. But Howard showed me around New York, took me to good restaurants and took good care of me.

"He also took me to DC, which had no use for a full-color artist at that time, and then to Marvel, where I landed my first real work, coloring the *Hulk* magazine. At the time, I believe it was the *only* full-color comic book being published in America."

That doesn't mean other comics were in black-and-white. It means they were produced using the standard "four-color" process employed for most American comics of the past 60+ years. In this streamlined process, the colorist prepares a rough color guide—a colored version of the black-and-white artwork—using only about 64 colors. The colorist also "codes" the color, indicating which specific color should go in each part of the drawing. Color separators follow the color guide to strip the colors in during production. By limiting the number of colors involved, the process is relatively cheap, which explains its popularity among publishers. Colorists also call this process "flat color," because that's how the colors look: flat, with no subtle variations or "modeling" effects.

When he started, Oliff didn't do flat color. He did "full process color," in which each hand-colored page is photographed. This process lets the colorist use a wide range of hues and effects, but it's more expensive, and it hadn't quite caught on in the late 1970s. So, after the *Hulk* mag folded, Oliff wound his way through independent companies like Pacific, Eclipse and First, mastering flat coloring as well as "every comic-book coloring system known to man."

Computer-coloring got a big break when a reluctant Marvel Comics was convinced by Katsuhiro Otomo to hire Oliff to color the U.S. version of his *Akira* series.

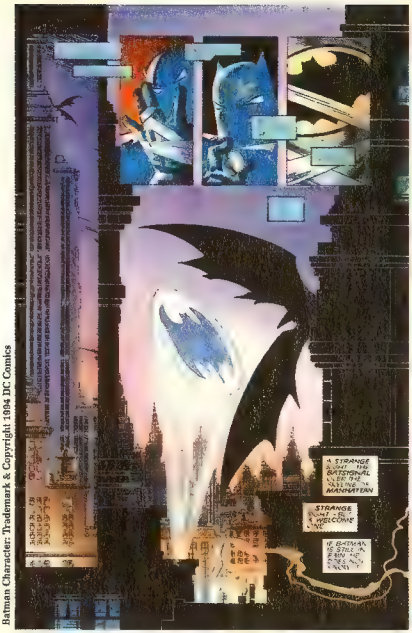
In the late '80s, the tide began to turn. Oliff brought full color to such prestige DC projects as *Blackhawk*, *Cosmic Odyssey*, *Gilgamesh* and *Twilight*, and even got cover billing. "DC was a real champion for full color in 1986-89," he notes.

Marvel, he recalls, "had no real interest in advancing the art form." In fact, Oliff remembers spending $475 "out of my own pocket" in 1985 on an interesting test: He colored a Spider-Man picture using one of the first computer paint packages, Lumina. "I took it to Jim Shooter (then Marvel editor-in-chief) and he said, 'Nah! Computers and comics? Never happen.' "

Ironically, it was Marvel that gave computer-colored comics their big break. In 1988, the company contracted Oliff to color its version of the Japanese hit comic *Akira*—although Oliff says he was hired only at the insistence of *Akira* creator Katsuhiro Otomo.

Photo: Courtesy Steve Oliff

Akira: Copyright 1988 MASH! ROUM Co, Ltd



Batman Character: Trademark & Copyright 1994 DC Comics

Computer-coloring has illuminated the role of colorists; 13 of Oliff's Olyoptics staff were credited in *Spawn/Batman*.

Strikeback Art: By Kevin Maguire/Colors: Olyoptics

Oliff even polishes up shadows on teeth.

Whereas Mike Saenz's fully computer-created *Shatter* came out first, it was a gimmick, like the later *Crash, Digital Justice* (CS SPECTACULAR #2) and *Donna Matrix* (CS #37). *Akira*, on the other hand, kicked computers into comics for real.

For his work, Oliff used IBM PCs running software from a company called Pixelcraft (Codd/Barrett now markets the software as Comic Prep). In the Olyoptics process, the black-and-white line art is scanned into the computer. The colorist prepares detailed color guides using various traditional media (markers, airbrush, gouache, colored pencils, etc.). The color guides are then passed to in-house color separators, who digitally apply the colors to the artwork in the computer, employing a variety of special effects suggested in the color guides. Separators, the grunts of the flat-color process, are called on to execute and even improve on the colorist's challenging vision.

Oliff saw many advantages to this computer-based process. Corrections are a snap—it's simple to zap the color out of an area and replace it, or nudge a wandering color blob back into an outline. Rather than essentially painting a comic, as with the full-color process, Oliff can do quicker color guides, leaving the separators to polish and perfect the final product. (Color guides, he says, take him 20 minutes to an hour per page, while separations average four to six hours per page, and can take up to 12 hours.)

Others also saw the computer's potential. "Within six months of my starting *Akira*, Pixelcraft had sold 16 systems to World Color Press, which printed most of the Marvel line," Oliff notes. "The real switch to computer-colored comics came in late 1988, but nobody would have noticed it. Everyone else was using computers to do *exactly* the same kinds of things they had traditionally done." In other words, most computer-colored comics still used the same old 64 flat colors. It was still cheaper that way.

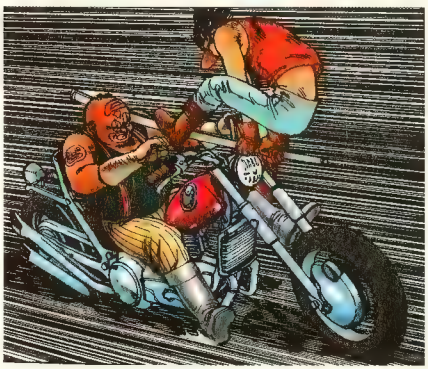
But Oliff wanted computers to do more than streamline the process. "I had a dream about comics having better color," he says. "This was the tool to do that. I pushed my own limits to deliver higher-quality color, and gradually, the color itself sold the computer-coloring process."

It sold comics too—especially since the Image fathers opted for computer color. "*Akira* got a little critical acclaim, but if we were lucky, it hit 50,000 fans," Oliff explains. "Once Image hit, everyone started saying, 'Why can't *our* comic books look like this?' "

In fact, Oliff says he had approached Marvel about computer coloring for McFarlane's *Spider-Man*, only to be rebuffed again. "They didn't care if it *was* their top-selling book," he charges, "they were too damn cheap to put out a little extra money to let Todd have better color."

McFarlane wasn't about to cheat himself. "When I went out on my own, my first calls were to Steve Oliff and [letterer] Tom Orzechowski," McFarlane recounts. "I wanted to bring the level of production up, and Steve was doing good stuff that needed a wider forum."

Spawn and the other Image books made Olyoptics (based in Point Arena, California) a much more lucrative venture, and brought the role of the colorist to the fore. "At DC and Marvel, color had traditionally been considered part of production, instead of part of the art," Oliff says. Now even separators could get noticed. The trend



Akira Art: Katsuhiro Otomo/Colors: Steve Oliff & Olyoptics

After Oliff prepares detailed color guides on a photocopy, art is scanned into the computer and colored using the latest digital effects.

Strikeback Characters: Copyright 1994 Jonathan Peterson & Kevin Maguire

Color Guide

Printed Art

All Spawn Art: By & Copyright 1993, 1994 Todd McFarlane/Colors: Steve Oliff, Reuben Rude & Olyoptics

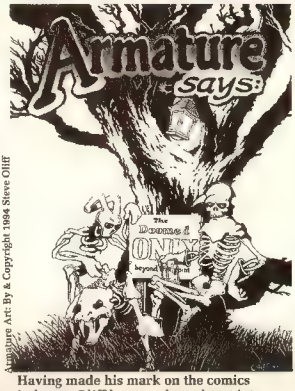
"Once Image hit, everybody started saying, 'Why can't our comic books look like this?' " notes Oliff.

may have hit its peak with 1994's *Spawn/Batman*, where 13 Olyoptics people (most of the staff) were given coloring credit, *besides* Oliff.

This respect was long overdue, Oliff says, because comic-book color is more than just window-dressing. "Color should set mood and advance the story," he claims. He likens comic coloring to lighting in films, and talks about giving different scenes different color themes that bolster their emotional impact.

Unfortunately, the computer's flexibility seduced many younger colorists into thinking razzle-dazzle special effects—and lots of them—equalled good coloring. Oliff acknowledges that some of the effects he popularized have gotten out of hand.

"There seem to be a lot of real bad digital airbrush artists out there," he chuckles. "If you don't know how to use a *real* airbrush, you should limit yourself." (Oliff was inspired to learn the tool by the work of underground artist Richard Corben; Oliff's other color influences include Vaughn Bodè of *Cheech Wizard*, EC colorist Marie Severin, Neal Adams and painter N.C. Wyeth.)



Armature Art: By & Copyright 1994 Steve Oliff

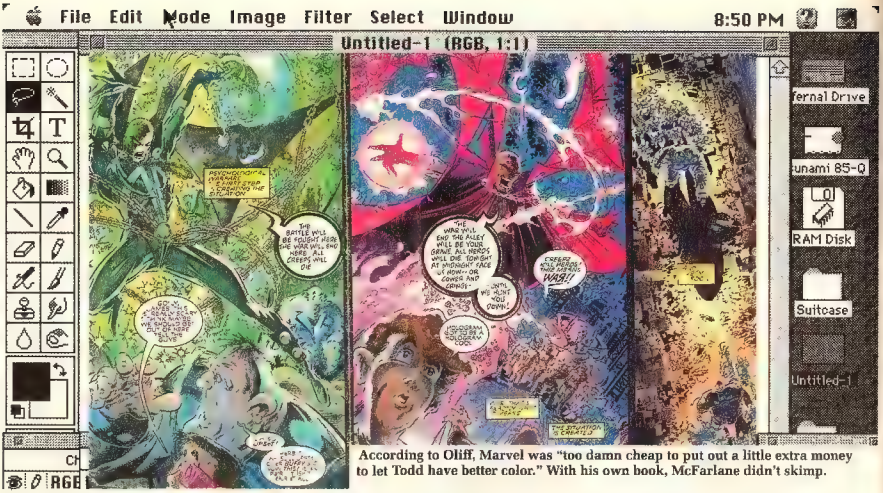
Having made his mark on the comics industry, Oliff hopes to branch out into animation with *Magic Observatory*, starring Armature.

A few more coloring tips from Oliff: Give the reader's eyes a rest with softer colors, or all the bright ones will strobe out. Learn to draw: "You have to know how light falls on a subject, or how can you model convincing forms?" Don't make *every* highlight on a superguy's muscles come out to white: "It looks ridiculous. There's only a certain range of light to dark that looks real in any situation."

And finally, rip your gaze away from comics once in awhile: "I live in the country, and see big, beautiful sunsets outside my window," Oliff says. "Many of those colors go straight into my work."

Oliff is used to dispensing advice—he's somewhat of a guru for many aspiring colorists. He prepared and sells a packet of information on the history of computer coloring, the whopping expenses involved and other getting-started issues. He teaches color theory at local grammar schools using Play-Doh. At the 1994 San Diego Comic Convention, he organized the Color Exploratorium, which included displays, instruction and a "color shoot-out" between Macintosh and IBM color systems, with participants from Digital Chameleon, Dark Horse, Extreme Color, Wildstorm Productions and other coloring houses.

But even the "father of computer coloring" has to push to stay current.



Design & Layout: Jim McLernon

According to Oliff, Marvel was "too damn cheap to put out a little extra money to let Todd have better color." With his own book, McFarlane didn't skimp.

Rapid software and hardware advances are fueling an increasingly competitive field. More firms offer computer color expertise—Reuben Rude and Abel Mouton, for example, left Olyoptics to start International House of Color this year, with funding in part from Erik Larsen.

Digital Chameleon's Kindzierski, who gives Oliff full credit for making computer coloring a reality, says, "I don't think his IBM system and software are at the cutting edge today. Look at what Dave Gibbons is doing in *Martha Washington Goes to War*—I don't think Steve can do that. I don't think he can do some of the stuff *we* do."

Specifically, Kindzierski argues that Oliff's equipment can't produce some of the jazzier new effects. Olyoptics' Codd/Barrett software requires the color separators to "draw" polygons with the mouse, little outlines around the area in the art where a specific color should go. Digital Chameleon's Mac-based systems don't, and they can execute ultra-smooth blends or simulate painterly dabs of color. "You actually mark the colors on a digitized tablet," says Kindzierski. "It's like drawing on a drawing table."

Oliff, however, believes that the polygon-cutting thing—the computerized equivalent of traditional color separation processes—works to Olyoptics' benefit. "It gives our work a real old-style comic look," he says. He feels Mac hardware and programs like Photoshop make it too easy to ignore the fundamentals of color theory and the printing process.

Still, Oliff doesn't refute charges that his Codd/Barrett software is out-of-date, despite all his upgrades. "It's a Mack truck with three gears and a fourth that doesn't work," he says fondly. "But it has style."

Oliff sees even greater competition in the future, as standards rise and more artists start their own color studios, as Rob Liefeld did with Extreme Color. You might think it's this pressure that's spurring Oliff toward a new field, animation.

But for Oliff, this seeming career switch is a move toward his roots. "I've always wanted to be an animator and do my own stories," he declares. "And my hobby is songwriting."

His dream project is a TV show mixing live action with animation. He has developed a concept called the Magic Observatory, a sort of funhouse-of-the-mind that mixes thrills with self-discovery. Oliff describes one of the lead characters, Armature, as "an interdimensional cosmic critter who pops around and has cosmic truth serum in his veins. If he squirts you, you can't lie to yourself anyone else.

"My stories are more cosmically oriented, more spiritual and growth-oriented," he explains. "Most comic characters today exist only to make money for people—they have no heart, no development. My work is based on real solid stories. Having worked on a lot of schlock comics, I know this is better than anything I've seen there."

In Oliff's ideal world, Olyoptics would animate and score these stories, then reprocess animation cels into print images, and use a layout package to rearrange them into a comic book. *Voila!*—instant adaptation. (Armature was scheduled to debut in his own Image comic this summer, but Oliff says the uncertain market nixed the idea.)

He has built Olyoptics' recording studio, and even cut tracks for the project, but the animation studio is lagging behind. "I had no idea of the scope of equipment and money required to pull off animation," admits Oliff, who estimates he still needs to pump another $150,000 into the studio. "It's a big cash guzzler."

So although Oliff had announced in mid-1994 that he planned to drop all his coloring chores except for *Akira* and *Spawn*—which, in different ways, made his career—the switch to animation is taking longer than expected. Olyoptics still colors *The Maxx* and does separations for *Pitt*, and Oliff has been prodded into taking on new books, like *Violator* and Neil Gaiman's *Angela*, two *Spawn* offshoots. The coloring work pays for Oliff's deluxe animation system, but also restricts the time he has to do anything *but* color. "I feel like I'm caught in a series of interlocking Catch 22s," he sighs.

Still, the longer Steve Oliff lingers in color, the happier some people are. People like Jonathan Peterson and Kevin Maguire, creators of Bravura's new series *Strikeback! The Hunt for Nikita* (CS #47), who snagged Oliff and Olyoptics for their book.

"With his sense of dramatics and detail, Steve blows the competition out of the water," says Peterson. "There's a panel in *Strikeback!* #1, a closeup of Rascal's face screaming, where Steve actually modelled each of the *teeth*. The fact that the guy thinks about what shadow a tooth casts on the tooth next to it confirms what everyone says: He's the best at what he does." CS

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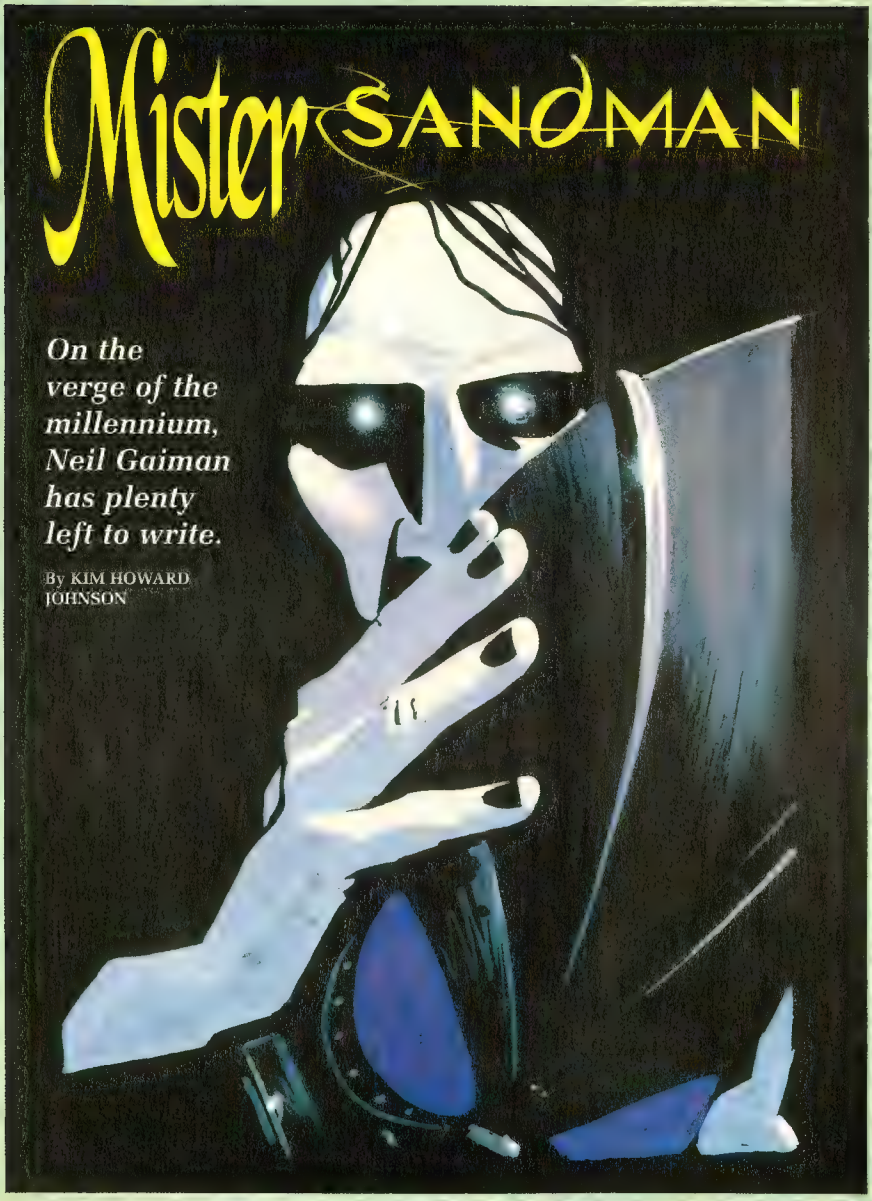
Mister SANDMAN

On the verge of the millennium, Neil Gaiman has plenty left to write.

By KIM HOWARD JOHNSON



Art: Matt Wagner All Sandman Art. Copyright 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, DC Comics Inc. Design & Layout: Yvonne Jung

Mr. Hero Art & Characters: Copyright 1994 BIG Entertainment

Gaiman's aim in creating Mr. Hero was to develop "a charming story of a machine out of time."

***Sandman*, the series which solidified Gaiman's reputation as a top writer, is about to reach its conclusion after seven years of melancholy adventure.**

Though he only jokingly refers to it as the "Gaiman-verse," award-winning comics writer Neil Gaiman is quite serious about creating new characters for Tekno•Comix.

"Gaiman-verse is a horribly clunky thing to say," he laughs. "I want to change my name to something you can put in front of 'verse.' I mean, Kirbyverses and Barkerverses all sound really cool. 'Gaiman-verse' does *not* sound cool, and 'Neil-verse' doesn't sound particularly cool, either!"

The co-creator of *Sandman* and one of the most highly respected writers in comics has developed his own characters for Tekno•Comix; the first of Gaiman's creations to star in his own series is *Mr. Hero—The Newmatic Man*, a Victorian-Age robot revived in the present day.

"What I wanted was something very, very charming with elements of adventure; a charming story of a machine out of time," says Gaiman. "I love the idea of a steam-driven robot. I love the idea of a robot that has been turned off for 100 years, and all of its attitudes are those of the Victorian Age, with all of the good things and all of the incredibly bad things which that embodied, like casual racism and sexism. It also has all of the good things that the Victorian Age may have had in its head, even though it seldom put them into practice.

"I wanted someone who was genuinely nice, genuinely good. In my original design for Mr. Hero, which I don't really think is being used, he actually had Victorian bathing drawers painted on. I took his name from Hero of Alexandria and his *Pneumatica*, the first book on the power of steam. I created it and wrote them a few paragraphs on Mr. Hero and a bunch of other characters. Jim [*Kings in Disguise*] Vance has been writing the comic with a lot of editorial input from the people at Tekno."

"I like comics, comics are cool," says Neil Gaiman, one of the medium's most acclaimed writers.

Gaiman says he gave Vance almost total freedom to develop Mr. Hero on his own, assisted by penciller Ted Slampyak and inker Bob McLeod.

"I handed *Mr. Hero* over to Jim," says Gaiman. "He took my initial paragraphs and we had a couple of phone conversations. I suggested Jim because I loved his work on *Kings in Disguise*; he's a fine writer. He did an outline for the first few episodes which was really great, and he's really establishing the characters."

Mr. Hero is a robot created during a Victorian Age in which computers and robots are powered with steam. He toured England as "The Newmatic Man—Pugilist and Ratiocinator" until a mishap forced his owner to dismantle him. Mr. Hero is discovered and reactivated in the present day by a girl named Jenny. But then, unfortunately, Teknophage, the ancient saurian villain responsible for his creation, begins hunting him.

Like so many of his other projects, Gaiman says his involvement with Tekno•Comix began with a phone call. "I got a call from Marty Greenberg, an anthologist for whom I had done a story or two and got on very well with. He said he was involved with these people who were putting together a line of comics, and he suggested me as someone who could create some characters. I didn't have time to write any more comics, but he said I didn't have to worry about that, so I sat down and created a whole batch of characters!

"During the course of things like *Sandman*, I'm forever creating things that there's never any room for, and coming up with ideas for things that I can't quite do, because there's only one of me and I don't have time. This was a case of taking a bunch of ideas for things I knew I could get to work if I were writing the comic. I think they wanted one character and I gave them five!"

Art: Marc Hempel

Gaiman even has his second series for Tekno•Comix ready to unveil this year. "Rick Veitch is doing a comic called *Teknophage*, which is another of my ideas based on the last of the dinosaurs still being around as a strange, evil industrial boss," he explains. "Rick has taken it even further, and Bryan Talbot is drawing it for release this spring."

Mr. Hero doesn't fall into the relatively new SF/fantasy subgenre known as "steampunk," explains Gaiman. "*Teknophage* is probably far more steampunk than *Mr. Hero*. Mr. Hero is clanking

All Mr. Hero Art: Ted Slampyak & Bob McLeod

A steam-driven Victorian robot who is reactivated in modern times is the star of *Neil Gaiman's Mr. Hero*, a new series from Tekno•Comix.

Hmm. Well met, my brothers.
So: a family meeting... the first since the prodigal announced his intention to leave us.
Well, well. It will be interesting to find out why you have called us here.

around in the here and now—he isn't in an alternate Victorian Age of Steam, although that's originally where he comes from. For me, the fun of it was the idea of a Victorian robot in the here and now."

Although *Mr. Hero* will probably fit in with the overall "Tekno•Universe," Gaiman is leaving much of that to Vance. "At one point, they asked me to align their universes," he says. "To be honest, my main suggestion at the time was that their universes would align much better if they didn't all try to take place in alternate versions of 2045, which was the original idea. I suggested a much more solid time line. I believe the events of *Mr. Hero* take place in the same universe as the Leonard Nimoy [*Primortals*] and Gene Roddenberry [*Lost Universe*] comics."

Like other Tekno properties, *Mr. Hero* may be shopped around Hollywood for consideration as a film or TV show. In the meantime, another Gaiman creation is progressing toward the big screen.

"[Producer] Jon Peters has attached himself to the *Sandman* movie, along with [screenwriters] Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio, who did *Godzilla* and *Aladdin*," Gaiman says. He's hopeful that a *Sandman* film will actually be made this time around. "I would like to go to a *Sandman* film that tells a great Sandman story in 90 minutes or two hours. I have no idea how to do that."

Whether a *Sandman* movie would adapt one of his comics stories or tell an original tale doesn't matter to him. "What I would really like is to *not* be embarrassed!" he laughs. "I would like to be able to smile as I walk out of the cinema. When people ask what I thought, I would like to say, 'I thought it was great!' I would hate to see *Nightmare on Elm Street* meets *Labyrinth*."

Gaiman says he'll have no input whatsoever on the film. "What I told DC was that if people are going to ring me up and ask me questions, I want to be a consultant and I want to be paid, on the basis that people seem to ring me up and ask me questions anyway. I figure that at least this way, I'll get paid money while they ignore me!

"I really don't want to get involved in it. I would much rather not invest my heart and soul and hopes in a

"That *Sandman* is a series with a definite endpoint was important to Gaiman because "you know the thing is not a soap opera, it's actually a story."

Art: Mike Dringenberg & Malcolm Jones III/Colors: Steve Oliff

Sandman movie, because I think the odds are against it. How many good movies have been made out of Stephen King properties? I don't see how *Sandman* would turn into a movie. I can see how you could do a successful version of *Death: The High Cost of Living*, because you could take that story and expand it, open it up and have more stuff happen. When turning *Sandman* into a movie, the first question is, 'What do you throw away first?' Do you try and do the first storyline? But you can't really do it, because it's not a movie-shaped story. How do you deform that into a movie, give it three acts?

"Ted and Terry have my very best wishes, because they're the ones who are going to have to sit around tables while people in suits tell them that the Sandman wouldn't act like that. I'm pleased that I don't have to sit around a table while people in suits tell me that Sandman wouldn't act that way. A good friend of mine told me that when I was ready to throw away my irrational prejudice of Hollywood, I could come and do a movie for him. I said I would be on the next plane if he could tell me that at *no point* in the creative process will I have to sit around a table while a bunch of accountants lecture me on story theory. There was a pause, and he said, 'But that's part of the game!' I told him I would stay home and write comics."

Gaiman also went through a discouraging experience with *Good Omens*, the novel he co-wrote with Terry Pratchett, which was once slated to be filmed by Wes Craven. "The company who had the rights, Sovereign Pictures, forgot to renew the option, so, technically, Terry and I have the rights back, and I don't think either Terry or I are particularly interested in doing something with them," says Gaiman. "Still, every six months or so, somebody will ring us up and say, 'So-and-so's interested.' But contrary to much popular wisdom, where writers sell their books and aren't allowed to write the screenplay, we tend to get people phoning up wanting to buy the book and wanting us to write the screenplay. We say, 'Not a hope! We're not going near that thing!' And that's normally where the deal closes down again."

Pratchett and Gaiman wrote a draft, which tried to include everything from the book in the movie. "We were told, 'We would like something a lot less like the book,' at which point Terry threw in the towel," says Gaiman. "I said I would go one more round to see what happens. I met them in North Carolina, because I wouldn't go to Hollywood and wanted to meet on neutral territory. After I wrote the script, I got a call back from them saying, 'We're kind of puzzled, because it's not a lot like the book!' I was about to quit when two days later, I got a phone call saying there was nobody at Sovereign Pictures, because the bank had taken over and fired everyone. I thought, 'Boy, the curse of Gaiman and Pratchett moves fast!' "

You have come then, Will Shakespeare.
It is all ready?
I WROTE IT AS YOU TOLD ME, LORD. IT IS THE BEST THAT I HAVE WRITTEN, TO THIS DATE
I am sure it is
SO... WE ARE HERE ON YOUR COMMAND, MY LORD, ON MIDSUMMER'S EVE, BY THE LONG MAN OF WILMINGTON AN ODD CHOICE OF A PLACE FOR US TO PERFORM...
Odd? Wandle's Mound was a theatre before your race came to this island...
BEFORE THE NORMANS?
Before the humans.
Art: Charles Vess
Sandman & Related Characters Trademark & Copyright 1989 DC Comics Inc.

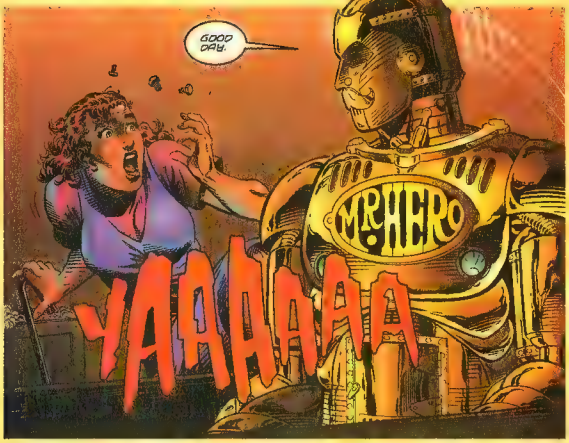
Gaiman won a Hugo award for his "Midsummer Night's Dream" issue of *Sandman*, in which William Shakespeare performs for a supernatural assemblage.

Gaiman is much more concerned about the *Sandman* comic book. The book is currently in its final major story arc, and Gaiman says he has learned a great deal from *Sandman*.

"I've discovered that serial fiction has power. Power to wrap readers in and get them involved. It has been seven years now, and one learns that readers can get involved with this stuff on a level that they don't normally get involved in with fiction. It has something to do with the nature of the medium, the power of serial fiction. The two things that got everybody involved over the past few years were 'Who Shot J.R.?' and 'Who Killed Laura Palmer?' "

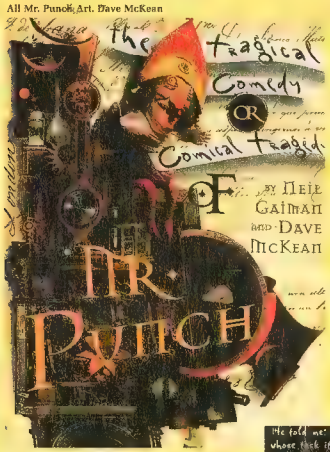
Gaiman admits that the two examples he cites are actually cliffhangers, which he hasn't done in *Sandman*, but he points out that *Sandman* could work with cliffhangers. "It's all due to the serial nature of the fiction," he says.

He thinks adapting the sprawling *Sandman* saga for the screen is nigh-impossible, but Gaiman believes his *Death: The High Cost of Living* mini-series is a better candidate.



Though his name is above the title, Gaiman actually just wrote a few paragraphs about Mr. Hero and turned it over to Tekno•Comix to produce.

All Mr. Punch Art: Dave McKean



"It's the best thing I've ever written, and the best thing Dave McKean has ever drawn," maintains Gaiman of the pair's *Mr. Punch* graphic novel.

"I think *Sandman* has the following it has because it comes out more or less every month, because people are genuinely involved."

By their very nature, most comics are serial fiction, yet few have received the acclaim of *Sandman*. "One of the things that I did very near the beginning was realize that I was going to do something that would have an end someday," he says. "Simply knowing I was doing something that ended and shaping it into something that ended, long before I had actually managed to persuade DC that I was doing something that would end, was very important—the fact that you know the thing is *not* a soap opera, it's actually a story that's going somewhere."

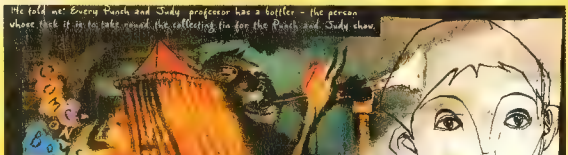
Sandman is moving toward a definite conclusion, and Gaiman has come to an agreement with editor Karen Berger and DC Comics that the character of Morpheus and his siblings will be retired when he finishes writing about them. It's a feat virtually unheard of in comics—the publisher agrees to end a very successful series because its creator doesn't want anyone else handling the characters.

"I wish they had done that earlier with other people, actually, looking at Vertigo now," notes Gaiman. "I wish they had finished *Animal Man* when Grant Morrison finished it, and I wished they had stopped *Doom Patrol* when Grant finished it. In each case, you had a really good little comic that people would have had very fond memories of. I have enormous respect for Rachel Pollack, but I think she could have done something far better than to try and continue *Doom Patrol*. All these things do is leave a sad taste in one's mouth—as if you meet a stranger who acts like a friend that you knew, but isn't. I would hate for that to happen to *Sandman*.

"DC and I have a very basic verbal agreement," he explains. "If *Sandman* ends when I do, I'll continue working for them and we will maintain good relations. If at some point they want to go back and do a *Sandman* thing, then that will basically be it. I know that with me, things depend an awful lot on having Karen there as editor; she makes life very easy and pleasant for me. Anyway, I don't think I'm burned out yet, and I still think I have a few more creative things left in me!"

At the moment, *Sandman* is set to end with issue #75, but Gaiman admits that those plans are subject to change. "We'll know in the next couple of issues whether I muck it all up," he jokes. "Everything takes longer than I thought it would. Part of that is because I thought, 'Oh, I have this story, "The Kindly Ones," I'll tie up all the loose ends and do all the various things I want to do.' One discovers that seven years' worth of loose ends take a long time to tie! And things take longer to happen. Each story sets its own pace, and a lot of stuff happens in 'The Kindly Ones.' "

Gaiman agrees that *Sandman* is the biggest project of his career to date. It has changed his life. "People take my

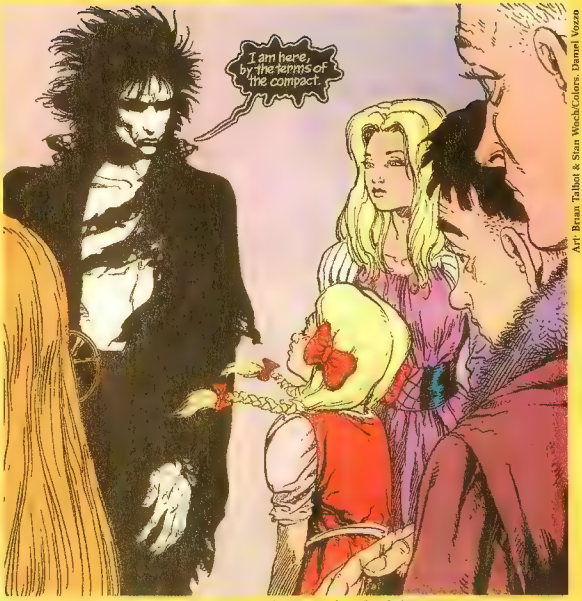

He told me: Every Punch and Judy professor has a bottler - the person whose trick it is to take round the collecting tin for the Punch and Judy show.
A good bottler, said Minster Swatchells, did more than that, though. A bottler starts the backchat with the puppets from the audience. A bottler makes sure that no children are crawling round the back of the booth, that no dogs raise their legs against the side of it. If a policeman comes to move you on, the bottler'll make sure you finish the show first. Some bottlers even blow trumpets...
Can I blow a trumpet?
They all laughed at that.

Frequent Gaiman collaborator McKean has used his radical, mixed-media graphics to set the mood for *Sandman* and now the *Mr. Punch* project.

phone calls now," he jokes. "Actually, I no longer have to *make* the phone calls—people phone me! And it has provided a certain amount of money, which is nice, not so much from the monthly comic but from the compilations, which stay in print and are steady sellers."

Filling the gap for fans will be a new spin-off title. "There's going to be a comic called *The Dreaming*," Gaiman explains. "It will consist of all of the characters that I didn't invent—and maybe a few that I did, characters like Cain and Abel and the Three Witches, various characters that were lying around for me to pick up. It won't feature Sandman or any of his family, and it'll be like *Legends of the Dark Knight* in that it will have one-, two- or three-issue stories done by different creative teams."

Gaiman's latest project is a limited-edition Vertigo hardcover, *Mr. Punch*, illustrated by Dave McKean. It's the project he's the proudest of. "It's the best thing I've ever written, and the best thing Dave McKean has ever drawn," raves Gaiman. "It's the first thing, *Sandman* included, that I've never felt embarrassed about showing anybody. Normally, when I'm going to hand over something I've written to somebody, I'll start apologizing, telling them it could have been better if we'd had more time. But not *Mr. Punch*—I'm totally happy with it. I did three major drafts, and I buried many things that were obvious in the first draft so they became less and less obvious. I'm sure it will be totally possible to read *Mr. Punch* without noticing any of the things that are happening! *Mr. Punch* is a book you can show to anybody who sneers at comics or the idea of comics. If they say comics can't be intrinsically good, you can show them this book. Of course, they'll probably fall back on, 'It's not strictly a comic.' I encounter that with some *Sandman* readers, who tell me quite cheerfully that they don't read comics. I say, 'Yeah, but you read *Sandman*,' and they say, 'But that's *not* a comic!' Of course it is! I like comics, comics are cool."



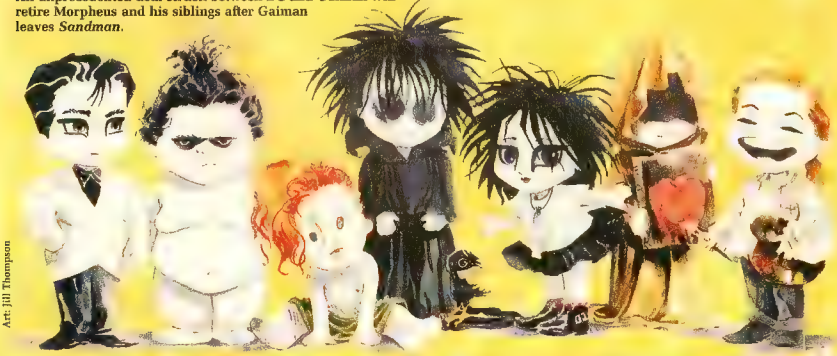
Art: Brian Talbot & Stan Woch/Colors: Daniel Vozzo

A wide variety of artists have worked on the series, but the defining vision in *Sandman* has always been the writer's, a very rare situation in comics.

Gaiman points out that his taste in comics developed naturally throughout the years. "When I was young, maybe through age eight, I really liked *Batman* and *Superman*; from age 12 through 16 or so, I would read omnivorously, but I really liked the mystery and horror stuff like the original *Swamp Thing* or the Len Wein-Jim Aparo run on *Phantom Stranger*," he says. "These days, I like *Eightball* and *Yummy Fur*, *Underwater*, I like Joe Matt's stuff, *The Acme Novelty Company* by Chris Ware, Steve Bissette's *Tyrant*, and *From Hell*."

At the beginning of the next century, Gaiman says he wants to be doing the same thing he has been doing. "I want to be telling stories," he says. "By the year 2001, I have two novels that I would like to have written and a travel book that I would really like to do. When I was a kid, I discov-

An unprecedented deal struck between DC and Gaiman will retire Morpheus and his siblings after Gaiman leaves *Sandman*.



Art: Jill Thompson

ered there was a little Welsh mining village in Patagonia called Gaiman. At some point, I want to set off and spend three or four months just going there. I really like the idea of doing a travel book. I like the idea of travel writing—you're out of the constraints of fiction writing; if you meet a mad old woman in Chapter Three, she doesn't have to turn up again in Chapter Seven."

The success of *Sandman* has more or less given Gaiman the ability to pursue such unlikely pursuits as travel writing. And despite his movie experiences in Hollywood, Gaiman is even currently investigating the world of television in Britain.

"I'm still at the mercy of monolithic corporate entities," he laments. "I'm writing a TV series now for the BBC. They commissioned a pilot for the first episode, and they liked it, so 18 months later they commissioned the next two. I got a fax saying they really, really do like it and they're thinking of doing a series of 12 rather than six. Which is nice."

The BBC originally planned the new series to take over the spot occupied by *Red Dwarf*, though the earliest the series could air would likely be this October. "The TV series is now called *Neverwhere*, and it's set in the world underneath London," Gaiman says. "It's a dramatic, funny fantasy about the London in the cracks, the London that people fall into when they're not paying attention."

Neverwhere is being done with Crucial Films, the production company owned by British comedian Lenny Henry. "I may try to talk Lenny into a cameo," says Gaiman. "He's co creator and instigated the thing. He sat me down and said, 'Neil, why don't we do a *Doctor Who* for the '90s?' That's how it all started."

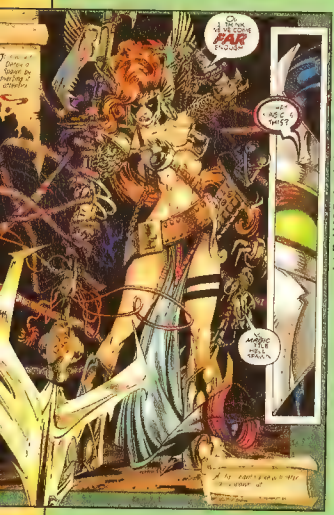
When Gaiman's phone rings today, it can be offers from Hollywood, from new comics companies or requests for short stories. "My interests lie in all of the above," he says. "I've always done stuff inside and out of comics. It's easy for the comics people to notice I have all the Harveys and the Eisners and assume that's the only side of me. Many people don't know that *Good Omens* exists."

With an eye on the brave new world of comic books as suggested by Tekno, Gaiman isn't sure where comics are going to be in the fast-approaching 2001. "I really don't know," he says. "That will depend entirely on the artists and the writers. It irritates me that we get some really brilliant artists, and occasionally some really brilliant writers, who do less than they're capable of in comics; they don't bring everything they have to the table when they do comics. I would like to see more of a breaking down of the Big Two than we have, and I would like to see fewer superhero comics. I would like to see more diversity."

Whether he's writing fantasy, science fiction or humor for comics, TV or films, Neil Gaiman's work is nothing if not diverse. And to his fans, there's nothing at all clunky about the idea of a Gaiman-verse. CS

Mikey Likes It.

Neil Gaiman is also scripting the *Angela* mini-series for Todd McFarlane and Image Comics, based on the character Gaiman himself created in *Spawn*.



Art: Todd McFarlane/Colors: Steve Oliff & Ruben Rude

"I did it because it was fun and it didn't take me very long," says Gaiman of his issue of *Spawn*, which introduced Angela, who has her own mini-series.

"My 11-year-old son Mikey is probably the world's biggest *Spawn* fan, and sends Todd an average of five or six Spawn drawings a week," says Gaiman. "Todd sends Mikey Spawn toys, and they go off and talk about them on the phone for hours! Having been upsetting him for years, after hearing, 'Daddy, why don't you do *X-Men*? Why don't you do *Batman*?' I'm finally proving myself worthy by doing a comic for my son. I'm writing it for him. Greg Capullo, who's drawing it, is incredible!"

The mini-series spins off the story Gaiman wrote when he scripted *Spawn* #9. "It's kind of a continuation of what I did with the character before. Angela is in it, Spawn is in part of it, there's lots of hitting, lots of shouting, lots of fighting and lots of running around. And because Greg likes drawing them, there are lots and lots of babes. I find that very odd, because I've never had a comic full of babes before! At one point, even Spawn comments that every woman in the series looks like an exotic dancer. By the third issue, Spawn and Angela are no longer on speaking terms, while their only way out of Hell is through a battle between armies of demons. Luckily, they've kidnapped a small butler, who they use to talk with each other. I wanted to do a comic Mikey would like, and have great fun!"

Gaiman is hoping that he will attract more *Angela* readers over to *Sandman* as a result of the mini-series. "I think anyone who liked my issue of *Spawn* will pick up *Angela*, and I think it's like that but even moreso," he says. "No one has ever done little plastic *Sandman* toys, so this is my chance at genuine fame, fortune and glory! You can't give $200 *Sandman* statues to 11-year-old boys to play with!"

When Gaiman, Alan Moore, Frank Miller and Dave Sim each guest-wrote an issue of *Spawn*, a few more pretentious critics accused them of "selling out" to Image, but Gaiman says it does not bother him in the slightest.

"If anyone accused me of selling out, I would point out what Frank Miller said—nobody ever told him he was selling out when he was working for DC or Marvel, even though he got paid more for *The Dark Knight Returns* than [*Batman* co-creator] Bill Finger got paid in his entire life!" says Gaiman. "I did *Spawn* #9 as a gesture of solidarity with Todd. I did it because Todd asked me to. I did it because I liked it and I did it because it was fun and didn't take me very long to write! I didn't do it for the money. Had I known beforehand how much money I was going to get for it, I probably would have said no, just because I would never have known if I was doing it for the money or not. But Todd, being smart, never mentioned money and it never came up. I did it because it was fun. And I'm doing *Angela* because I'm making my 11-year-old-son proud of me.

"Actually, Todd thinks of Mikey as his secret weapon right now. Mikey asked me, 'Daddy, are you going to write a medieval *Spawn* comic? Todd would really like it!' "

—*Kim Howard Johnson*

Angela/Spawn: Copyright 1993, 1994 Todd McFarlane Productions Inc.

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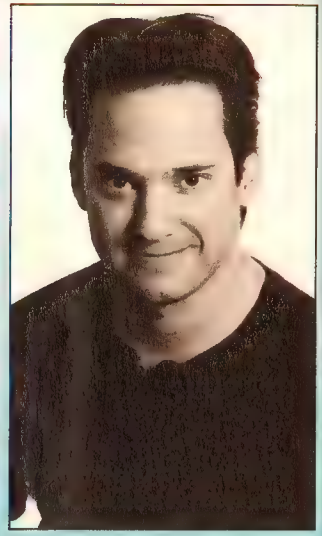
ABOVE the NORM

By MICHAEL BERRY



Despite his youthful appearance, Norm Breyfogle joined comic vets like Gil Kane and Howard Chaykin under Malibu's Bravura banner with *Metaphysique*.

Taking his superheroes to a higher plane, Norm Breyfogle gets philosophical about comics.

Just past his "Prime," longtime *Batman* artist Norm Breyfogle is now focusing his energies on a creator-owned project that explores life's Big Questions while providing plenty of action-packed superheroics. In moving from Malibu's Ultraverse to the company's Bravura line, he also dons both scripter and illustrator hats for the first time with *Metaphysique*, a six-issue mini-series described by its author as "*Altered States* meets *Superman*."

To bring *Metaphysique* to fruition, Breyfogle is drawing on a quarter century's worth of artistic experience. "I've wanted to draw comics since I was about nine years old, when I first saw Neal Adams' rendition of Batman. That pretty much decided it for me."

Breyfogle grew up in Michigan, and in a very unusual parental move, his mother actively encouraged him to read comics. It wasn't before long that he was picking up illustration pointers by following the examples of the leading artists of the '70s.

"Jim Aparo was a big influence, in fact, the first one to top Neal Adams for me," Breyfogle says. "I thought he had a whole new, athletic and lean look to Batman, with great body language. I've always liked the consistency of Curt Swan and the realism of his figures. Murphy Anderson had a nice brushstroke. Joe Kubert had a great one." Other influences include Gil Kane, Dick Giordano and Berni Wrightson, as well as the Impressionists and classical painters.

Breyfogle studied art throughout high school and landed his first comics job with "Tech Team," a 24-page story he wrote and illustrated to advertise Michigan Technological University to high school students around the state. Ten thousand copies of the comic were printed. "Michigan Tech has the originals in a vault in their library," Breyfogle says. "I checked them out a couple years ago, thinking I might take them home, and they were in such mint

Photo: Courtesy Valiant Comics

"His cape is a wonderful design element," points out Breyfogle, whose trademark pointy cape is familiar to *Batman* readers.

condition that I let them keep them."

After studying painting, graphic arts and illustration in college, Breyfogle moved to Southern California, where he found drafting and technical drawing work at power plants and Air Force bases. Like many others in the comics industry; he was discovered at the San Diego Con and landed an assignment with DC Comics' *New Talents Showcase* in 1984. Within a year, Breyfogle was drawing the *Bob Violence* back-up feature in First's *American Flagg* monthly book and was represented by Star*Reach Productions.

At the urging of Breyfogle's agent, DC editor Denny O'Neil eventually offered the artist a shot at drawing Batman regularly in *Detective Comics*. Even though this was just before Tim Burton's movie thrust the character back into the national consciousness, Batman was a plum assignment for a young artist.

Breyfogle explains the Dark Knight's appeal: "He's almost as famous as

Design & Layout: Freddy Collado

Colors: Anthony Tollin

All Additional Art: Norm Breyfogle

Bloodshot Trademark & Copyright 1995 Valiant Comics

Superman. He's very moody. There are a lot of shadows and his cape is a wonderful design element. He's not too fantastic, hanging in the balance between the really weirded-out science fiction and fantasy elements and the hard-boiled detective story. He has a lot of neat gadgets, great supporting characters, and the villains are as fun to draw as the *Dick Tracy* villains would be."

Even though Breyfogle worked on one Batman book or another for more than six years, including *Batman*, *Detective Comics* and *Shadow of the Bat*, he says he wasn't given the opportunity to draw many of the more familiar members of Batman's rogues gallery, folks like the Riddler, the Penguin or Poison Ivy. On *Detective Comics*, for example, writer Alan Grant preferred to concoct new antagonists from scratch, and Breyfogle spent his

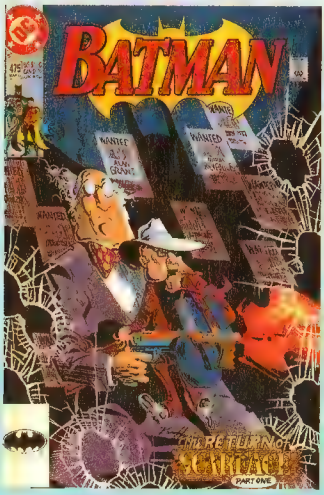
Breyfogle left his position as penciller of *Prime* to do *Bloodshot* for Valiant.

time designing characters that no one had ever heard of before.

Selecting his favorites among these new villains, Breyfogle notes, "Cornelius Sirk was excellent, because he can hypnotize a person and be seen in any way he wants. I would like to draw that character again. The Corrosive Man was a lot of fun to draw, because I came up with a neat design for him."

Breyfogle's choice for the ultimate Batman bad guy might surprise some readers. "The Ventriloquist, in my opinion, is the best villain that has been created for Batman, at least since the Joker. He's an archetypal figure. Not the most exciting visually, but the most interesting character."

In addition to the regular *Batman* series, Breyfogle also did a couple of high-profile graphic novels featuring the character. The first was 1991's *Holy Terror*, with a script by Alan Brennert.



"The Ventriloquist, in my opinion, is the best villain that has been created for Batman, at least since the Joker," states Breyfogle.

The first book to bear the Elseworlds label, *Holy Terror* (CS #21) presented a vision of an alternate America where the Church and State are one and Batman must don a satanic costume to avenge his father's death.

Breyfogle says he saw the book as an opportunity for artistic growth, particularly in learning to render architecture in general, and the Gothic forms in particular. "Meeting deadlines on a monthly basis makes it difficult to develop in every way. You have to choose an area to develop for the time being and then move on to something else."

According to Breyfogle, his toughest comics assignment came with 1992's *Birth of the Demon*, the fully-painted origin of Ras al Ghul, written by O'Neil and packaged as a hardcover graphic novel. "It's really difficult to do a full-color painting every page for a hundred-something pages on deadline."

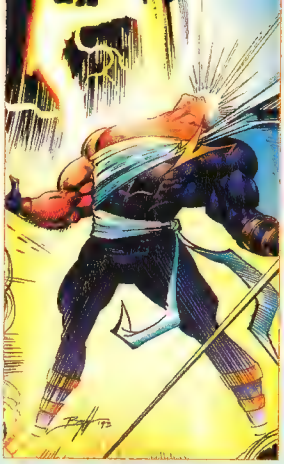
O'Neil turned to Breyfogle again when he needed to get the "Knightfall" crossovers up and running in a hurry. "When Denny called and told me he needed some issues drawn really quickly, I groaned. He said, 'Just trying to throw some money at you,' and I said, 'I don't know if I can meet my *Shadow of the Bat* commitments.' He said, 'Well, you can find somebody to fill in for you there,' and I replied, 'Well, if that's what you really want.' "

Breyfogle says he had no idea "Knightfall" was going to be such a big deal, that the initial issues he drew were only a prelude to the vastly complicated saga that featured the breaking of the Batman and the rise and fall of Azrael.

"If I had known that two years ago, I never would have left *Batman* to do *Shadow of the Bat*," Breyfogle admits. "Instead, Mike Manley stepped right in and reaped the huge financial rewards. I got some nice royalties from the issues I did, but nothing like the 500th issue." He laughs ruefully. "I could have retired for a couple of years."

Rather than retire on his *Batman* earnings, Breyfogle joined Malibu Comics in 1993, just as it was beginning to formulate the concept that would become the Ultraverse. "I would like to think that I was Malibu's point man. I was probably the most visible creator for them."

Breyfogle drew a couple of issues of *Hardcase*, then became the regular penciller for *Prime*, written by Gerard Jones. And what did he learn from drawing the adventures of a teenager

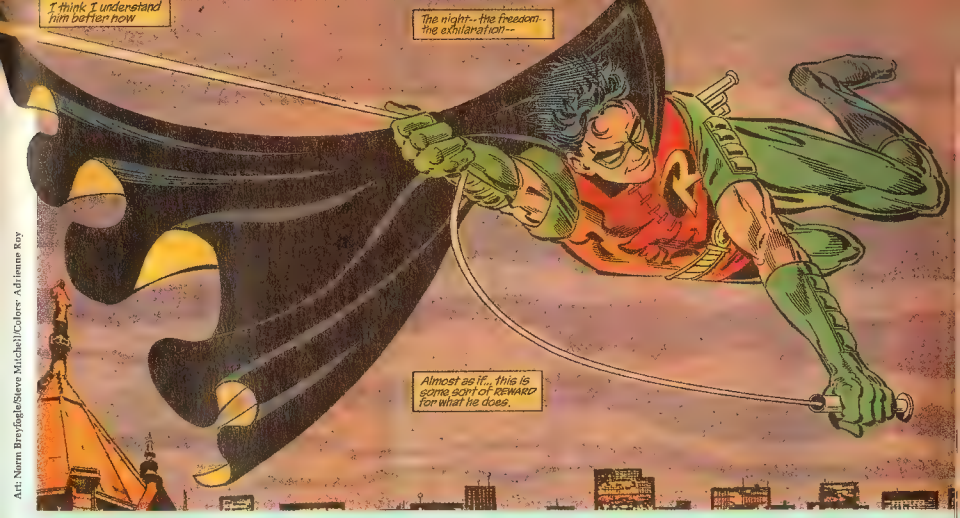


Breyfogle joins the growing ranks of comics writer/artists with his *Metaphysique* series.

Metaphysique: Trademark & Copyright 1994 Norm Breyfogle

Of his work on *Prime*, Breyfogle says, "I learned how to orchestrate the muscles of a superhero and make them larger without making them ridiculous."

Prime: Trademark & Copyright 1993, 1995 Malibu Comics


I think I understand him better now
The night-- the freedom-- the exhilaration--
Almost as if... this is some sort of REWARD for what he does.

Art: Norm Breyfogle/Steve Mitchell/Colors: Adrienne Roy

Tim Drake swings across Gotham without a care in the world, except for those pesky 1-800 numbers, of course. They can lead to untimely doom.

with a super-strong and hypertensive alter ego? "I learned how to draw veins," Breyfogle laughs. "It's a lot trickier than it looks. I also learned that I could have been drawing Batman a lot more buffed all along and still make him look lean and athletic. I learned how to orchestrate the muscles of a superhero and make them larger without making them totally ridiculous. I also got a chance to draw a lot of bombastic fight scenes, which I never did before."

After so many years with DC, Breyfogle says he enjoyed working for a smaller company like Malibu. "They're flexible because they have to be. Also, since the Ultraverse was a new universe, I was able to put my stamp on things more easily. *Batman* already had 50 years of history when I started on him. *Prime* had none. So, there was a real feeling of freedom."

Prime also benefitted from high production values. Each issue was printed on quality paper and featured eye-catching coloring. Breyfogle says, "It was like doing a DC prestige format book every month."

He has now ended his tenure on *Prime*, but the artist says he liked doing the book. "I was pleased that *Prime* became sort of the flagship title of the Ultraverse. I would like to think that had something to do with me."

Breyfogle left *Prime* to sign on with Valiant to do two issues every other month of the soon-to-be twice-monthly *Bloodshot*. "It's a drastic change from anything I've done in the past. The book is going to be another example of artistic growth for me."

As for why he made the switch to Valiant, he says simply, "They made me an offer I couldn't say 'no' to. It's too bad, because I did want to stay on *Prime*. But I had been on it for a year and now I'm working on *Metaphysique*. If I'm going to work on a company-owned character after a self-owned one, I guess I want to get the highest price I can."

Which brings us to *Metaphysique*, Breyfogle's current pet project. Based on *The Astral Kid*, an unpublished series concocted before Breyfogle became a comics pro, the new mini-series takes its cues from a wide array of non-fiction sources, such as Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* and the research of inner-space pioneer John Lilly.

"I always felt that there was a writer in me," Breyfogle says. "Writing *Metaphysique* was a real education, a real pleasure and a real challenge all at the same time. I feel that I've learned a lot, and I'm happy with the results. It was a big hurdle for me, because I hadn't

(continued on page 62)

Art: Norm Breyfogle/Steve Mitchell/Colors: Adrienne Roy

Street-level brawls like this won't be too common in *Metaphysique*, Breyfogle's philosophical new comic.

Batman & Associated Characters' Trademark & Copyright 1990, 1991, 1995 DC Comics Inc.

The Visitor & All Related Characters & Art: Copyright 1995 Voyager Communications Inc. Art: Bernard Chang/Bob McLeod

JUST VISIT

The Valiant Universe gains a whole new kind of hero, the mysterious Visitor.

Art: Bernard Chang/Bob McLeod

By KIM HOWARD JOHNSON

The Valiant Universe is welcoming a new Visitor. He's no stranger to Valiant readers, but even longtime fans don't know him.

The Visitor has been around for a while, but no one has known that he's actually one of the most powerful heroes of all. The mystery of his identity will continue for the first several stories, though readers will receive clues with each issue, according to Bernard Chang, who will be alternating pencilling chores on the series with Luke Ross when the title goes twice-monthly in March as part of Valiant's Birthquake relaunch.

"More and more clues will be handed out, but the actual unveiling of the character won't happen until later this year," says Chang. "Still, we will keep dropping hints here and there."

Kevin VanHook, scripter of the title, enjoys writing the mystery character, but agrees it's like writing *Superman* without using Clark Kent. "Because I'm doing things with the supporting cast, the disadvantages are actually quite minimal for me," explains VanHook. "It makes for a nice challenge, and I have to sit down and look at things in an interesting way. 'How do I get this across within these limitations?' I enjoy that kind of thing."

The new *Visitor* series immediately follows the two-part *The Visitor vs. the Valiant Universe*, in which the Visitor battles and defeats the majority of the company's heroes, including such stalwarts as Bloodshot, X-O Manowar and Solar. VanHook says *The Visitor vs. the Valiant Universe* was designed to introduce the character.

"I wanted to do an intro book, something to present *The Visitor* to the world at large," the writer explains. "At the same time, I wanted issue #1 to be

Kevin VanHook looks forward to writing a straight-out superhero book, starring a hero all involved hope will become a flagship title for Valiant.

ING

a clean slate—I didn't want him to have the extra baggage of all of the other Valiant characters. I wanted to do this story, so we came up with the idea of a separate package to give readers an idea of what the Visitor was all about through the eyes of mainstay Valiant characters like Bloodshot, Solar and X-O. At the same time, I wanted him to start fresh in issue #1 with his own villain and his own setup.

"One of the big questions many of us have at different times about comics heroes is, 'Where does this character stand, strength-wise, against this other character?' I had to come up with guidelines that other writers could understand. This book sets up the premise that the Visitor is extremely powerful, and even some of the strongest characters in the Valiant Universe weren't able to pull him down."

Villains and supporting characters are the focus of the first few issues. "*The Visitor* #1 saw the Harbinger show up," says Chang. "He's actually Harada's secret weapon/super-assassin. Harada wants to paint the Visitor as a public enemy for the media, so he uses the Harbinger to create public scenes that make it look like the Visitor is a villain, and their fight concludes in issue #2.

"Beginning in issue #3, the Visitor will fight a crime spree that's affecting jewelry stores in Beverly Hills—the book takes place in Southern California. The Visitor stops one of the attempted robberies, but the secret boss of this group doing the robberies forces the Visitor to let his men go, because he has planted a bomb somewhere, and children will be harmed if he doesn't let them go. The Visitor has all of the strength and abilities anyone could want, but he still must use his intelligence to locate the bomb and save the children."

Several supporting players will be heavily involved in the first few issues. "We have recurring characters like Major Benson, who was drummed out of the Air Force for an incident that occurred in Area 51, where he believes

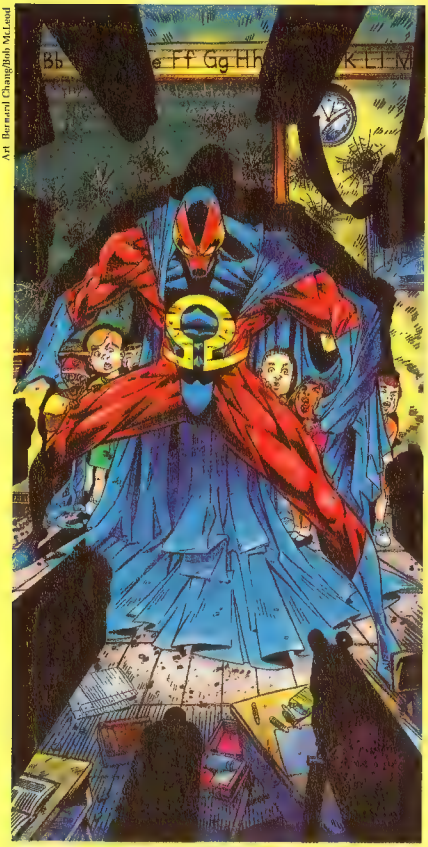
Art: Bart Sears/Ray Kryssing/Colors: Borkowski

"They more or less come at a problem from different angles," says VanHook of an upcoming meeting of Ninjak and the Visitor.

Photo: Courtesy Valiant Comics

"I'm adapting my style to set the book's mood," says penciller Bernard Chang, who's putting a harder edge on the Visitor.

Art: Bernard Chang/Bob McLeod



Art: Bernard Chang/Bob McLeod

Readers can expect explosive action from *The Visitor*. Our hero seems to spend a great deal of time being beat up, blown up and generally treated roughly.

"It makes a nice challenge," explains VanHook, who is forced to write *The Visitor* without revealing his hero's secret identity—for now.

he saw aliens," Chang explains. "He's trying to find a way to prove that the Visitor is evidence that there's alien life out there. He's trying to fight the government and the press, while exposing the Visitor as an alien creature come to Earth."

"Another of the supporting characters is named Chan, a monk who came with him to the United States—that's really the only thing he has brought with him from the Valiant Universe to his own title, because Chan did make a brief appearance in the *Chaos Effect* storyline last summer," says VanHook. "He reflects the Visitor's own naiveté, yet he's also pure and innocent, and cuts to the heart of most issues. Concepts like stealing and lying are foreign to him; he has a very Zen philosophy that provides a nice balance.

"I'm focusing on creating new villains," VanHook continues. "The Harbinger will be a recurring character. The Visitor will continually be plagued by Harada in some fashion. I also have the Harbinger team coming into play this spring—they're seeking help, too. They see the Visitor as someone who's clearly opposing this Harbinger villain—their nemesis, too."

Another supporting character will be familiar to *Harbinger* readers. "One of the *Harbinger* characters that disappeared about a year ago is coming back into the storyline," says VanHook, who also scripted the soon-to-end *Harbinger* monthly. "Flamingo, one of the original renegade kids with fire powers, is back. Her life has completely changed since she disappeared. She went through a born-again experience, looking at things with very different eyes than she did a year ago. She now sees the Visitor's appearance as an almost Biblical experience, a sign that it's time to deal with what she considers to be the Demon from the East, Harada. So, it's almost an allegory!"

The Visitor and *Harbinger* are interrelated by way of their villains, though they can easily be read and enjoyed independently. "*Harbinger* fans will be able to pick up *The Visitor* immediately and have something they can grasp onto and recognize," notes VanHook. "I'm constructing it in such a way that you *don't* have to read *Harbinger* to enjoy *The Visitor*. They're linked, at least in terms of their villains. Harada is after the renegade Harbinger kids, and he's also after the Visitor, because the Visitor is something he doesn't understand and can't control."

Following *The Visitor vs. the Valiant Universe*, the writer says the new hero will have limited interaction with other Valiant heroes. "Initially, I'm not doing a lot, although I do have a story with *Ninjak* coming up in the spring, in which they're more or less coming at a problem from two different angles," VanHook says. "I'm trying to set up *The Visitor*'s own continuity. One of the things that I'm afraid of is that I don't want to link it so much that people think they have to pick up every Valiant title to be able to enjoy *The Visitor*. This is a book that can be read by itself."

Valiant calls the Visitor their first "public superhero," and Chang agrees. "DC has Superman, and everyone who lives in Metropolis knows that Superman lives there, and will come and save the day. The Valiant superheroes have been kept from the public. Few people know about X-O or Solar. They all have these identities they try to keep hidden from the public eye. *Shadowman* is set in New Orleans, but even the people who live there don't know much about Shadowman. They're not waiting for Shadowman to

Art: Bernard Chang/Bob McLeod

come around and save the day—he's more of a shadowy, cloaked vigilante.

"The Visitor will get a great deal of media exposure, and at first there will be a lot of public support for him. In *The Visitor vs. the Valiant Universe*, he saves people from an earthquake on the West Coast by flying in and holding up a building. Because of that, people in LA know about him, but it's only something shown on TV on the East Coast, so how believable is it? Kevin's going to be playing along on that as well."

Chang says the Visitor will soon become the best-known hero to the general public within the confines of the Valiant Universe. "He's going to be one of the first people the public see flying overhead and doing amazing things. Solar was considered freakish; people talked about some guy disassembling a nuclear power plant. Here, the people will know his identity, they'll know it was the Visitor doing something. CNN and other media will report sightings of the Visitor saving firefighters. The press will also want to investigate this Visitor—is he really a superhero, or is he a Hollywood promotion? And that's where Harada comes in. He wants to make this Visitor seem evil, so that he can control him."

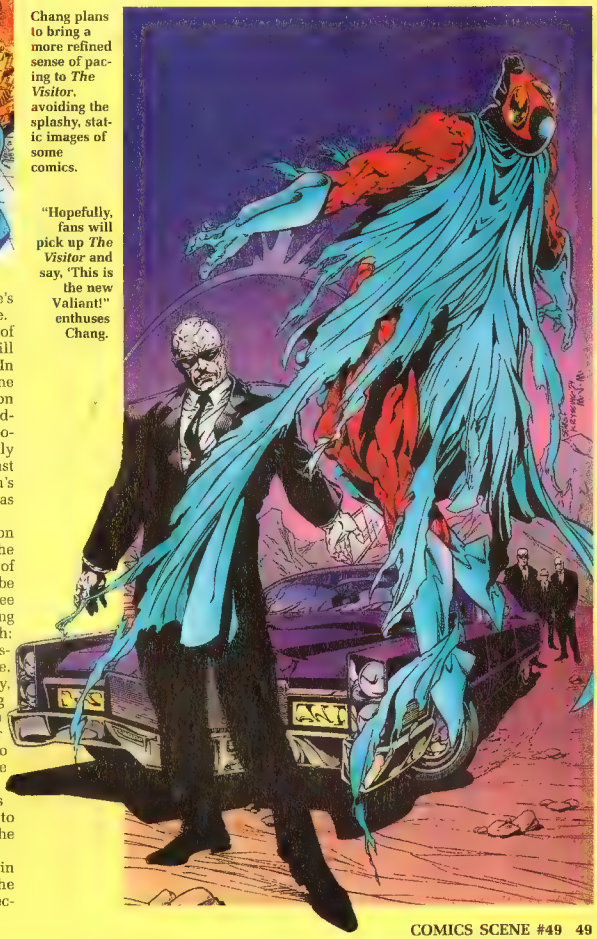
However, the principal villain in the book will actually be the Harbinger. "He's introduced in the second issue of *The Harbinger Files*," says Chang. "They fight against each other in issues #1 and #2, and Harbinger will return later on, becoming his archenemy. We're also introducing a couple of new characters in issue #3, including the secret crime boss who plays a big role down the road. Harada will play a big role, because Harada wants to ruin the Visitor. And, Kevin has many other characters in mind."

Chang says they've assembled a substantial creative team for *The Visitor*. "With Kevin writing it, we have a solid Valiant story, and I've been changing my art style a little for this book. Many artists usually draw one way, and I think each book deserves a certain look and style. I'm not completely changing the way I draw, I'm adapting my style to set the book's mood. This has a harder edge. And Bob McLeod has been able to add a lot to my pencils. I've been very fortunate to work with Bob; he's not just a fine inker, he's a fine draftsman and artist. [Editor] Jesse Berdinka has been the man behind the scenes. He got Bob McLeod signed for the book. He's the one who pushed for computerized coloring. He has been coming up with a lot of cool ideas behind the scenes.

(continued on page 60)

Chang plans to bring a more refined sense of pacing to *The Visitor*, avoiding the splashy, static images of some comics.

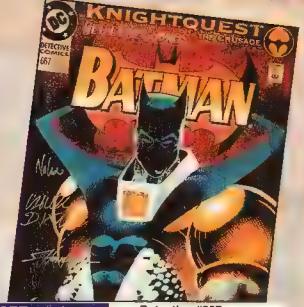
"Hopefully, fans will pick up *The Visitor* and say, 'This is the new Valiant!" enthuses Chang.



Art: Bart Sears/Ray Krysung

Design & Layout: Yvonne Jang

Signed COMICS COLLECTIBLES



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The J3 complex, headquarters of J. Jonah Jameson's media empire, is just one of the New York locations created by *Spider-Man* art director Dennis Venizelos.

Bringing to life the wall-crawler's animated world is all in a day's web work for Dennis Venizelos.

By PAT JANKIEWICZ

In Dennis Venizelos' office at Marvel Films Animation, you can see New York. You can spot stone gargoyles, water towers, the Empire State Building and the World Trade Center, all from the ground floor of his Los Angeles workplace. This is because Venizelos is the art director of the animated *Spider-Man* series. He's accustomed to poring over books, maps and posters, all the better to capture the webbed hero's native environment.

Besides books like *Manhattan: An Island in Focus* and *New York: Heart in the City* lying open on his art table, Venizelos also has character designs of Spidey's friends and foes scattered about the room, as well as sketches of Spidey jumping, pouncing and fighting.

"Spider-Man is going to be *alive* this time," Venizelos promises. "We've seen him in the past where he hasn't been very animated, but this time he's going to be doing all the somersaults, swinging and fun stuff. This is a giant leap from *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends*. It's going to be correctly done.

"We make him more spider-like than you've seen him in the past—he's not going to be strolling down streets, he'll be climbing and rappelling off walls," Venizelos explains.

Some aspects of the wall-crawler are harder than others to bring to life. "We're still trying different ways of portraying his spider-sense," Venizelos notes. "We might have some computer effect like in *Predator*, where they used heat-seeking imagery. We haven't decided yet which way to go."

Spidey's unusually angular design on the series "was the work of many people to get a certain type of look for him, because we felt the one from the comic books was too complex for animation. The line work is simplified because our animators would go crazy with all those webs [on his costume].

"The web..." Venizelos says with a hopeless shrug. "*You* try to figure out which way it goes! We use his web as basically a symmetrical device out of his face. It works the same way down his body, like a cylinder.

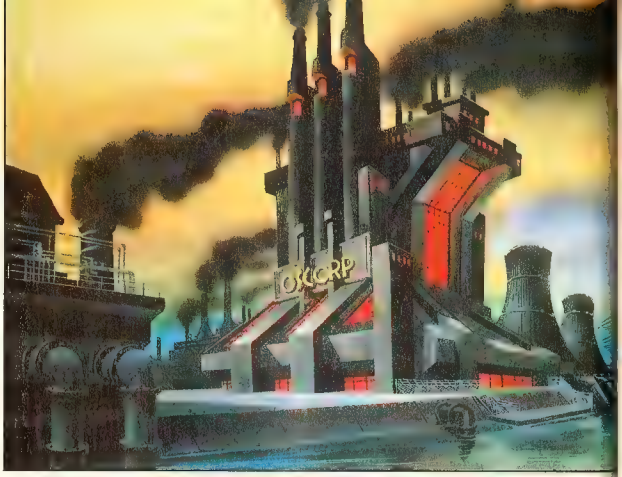
"We also wanted to see a little more structure to Spider-Man, so he has a swimmer's body to make him more agile. He can't be too thin because he's going to fight all these powerful villains. If you have this little, spindly, thin person fighting massive foes, it wouldn't work. We gave him more muscularity in the shoulders and the rest of his body. Of all the characters, Spidey is the most fun to draw," the art director concedes. "He's the one you can put in all kinds of positions and he'll still look good.

"His fingers aren't as blunt as they look in some shots, they'll be rounded off and sophisticated. The fingers are big in scenes where he climbs up walls—you'll see them grip the wall because you want to know that his fingers are attached to the wall and not sliding; the whole purpose of Spidey is crawling up walls!"

However, Spider-Man's alter-ego was the real challenge for Venizelos.

"Peter Parker was difficult to design because many people saw him drawn so many different ways in the comics, so it was hard to get a certain look for him in the series. For Peter, we used a design from the comics' earlier days, because today the comics have gone crazy with him. We give Peter Parker a normal, gentle look."

The women in Spidey's life will be anything but normal and gentle. "Felicia Hardy and Mary Jane are both in this show, so there's a little conflict, a love triangle," the designer smiles. "We see Mary Jane as a young Ann-Margret; she's a pretty classy looking character. She was fun to design, except for her hair. The comics gave her that 'hair look' and we tried to change it, but it lost something, so we had to go back to it. I don't like Mary Jane's bangs; they look like cut-out boards.



"In designing Felicia, we kept sophistication in mind. She's from the 'higher end' of life. It was fun doing her because she has a lot of class. We wanted her to be an 'upper class' type of person. The characters are developed from the comics and adjusted from there.

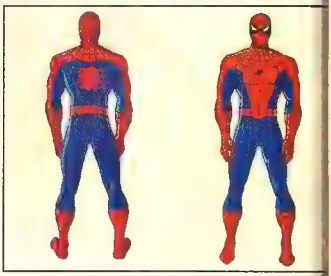
"For Aunt May, we looked at certain voices to see what she sounded like before we designed her," explains Venizelos. "From there, we developed the character. She has to have a very soft, nice voice to give her that motherly image. Aunt May was redesigned because we didn't want her to look so frail for several reasons. She has to raise Peter and he's rambunctious, and she couldn't do it if she was too frail. Also, it wouldn't look good if she was as old as she is in the comics.

"We gave her a kind face and her hair has been redone, since we didn't like the way it was tied back in the comics. It was too clichéd. There's a pet in May's household, Fogerty the cat. He's a raunchy local cat that Peter hates, but it likes him. We wanted a companion for Peter because he's alone in his room all the time, so we decided to give him a pet." Venizelos promises it won't be the typical annoying cartoon animal.

"I think the regular characters are important, because the whole show is about them and Spidey. Basically, they're everyday people—*not* super people. Even the villains are everyday people whose lives have gone awry. Spidey himself is just a normal guy who was bitten by a spider. He's not a superhero; he has some strength, but he's not Superman. He still has all the problems of everyday life.

"The regular characters are as interesting to design as the super villains because that's the meat of the story: everyday life and real people. J. Jonah Jameson, for example, is a great, strong character, an individual who owns a lot of multimedia corporations. He comes off very tough, but Jonah is fun."

Fans of the Big Apple won't be disappointed, as Spidey will cavort on and through such familiar locales as the spire of the Helmsley Building overlooking Park Avenue. "We have quite a few New York landmarks in the show. Kingpin has a real plush headquarters inside the Chrysler Building—a Chrysler Building-like design," Venizelos clarifies. "Kingpin has taken over the top floor. Whole



Not only will the animated Spidey look like the comics version, he'll *move* like him, assuming all those bendy, spider-like positions.

Animated Spider-Man Art & Model Sheets: Courtesy Marvel Films Animation.

sides of the building open up for airplanes to fly through.

"The show will also have the water towers that are very prominent in New York, and a bit of the city's character will be shown. There will even be some rooftop shots. We have various books and use maps for all the areas we will use on this show. OsCorp [Norman Osborn's chemical factory] is located in a power plant on the New Jersey side of the bay, and the *Daily Bugle* is down on 33rd Street."

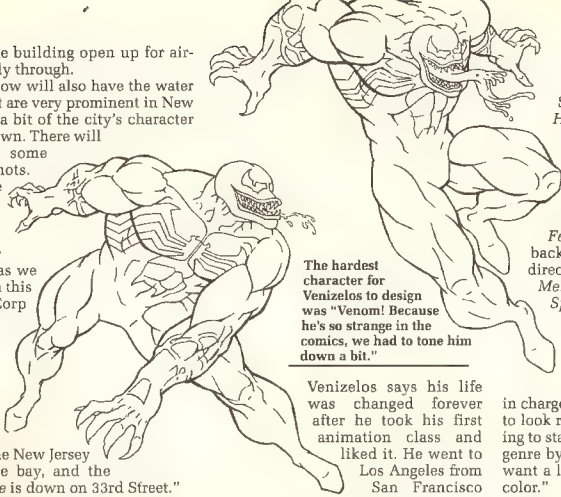
Peter Parker's boss now has a much more impressive office. "He has the J3 Complex—Jameson is a multibillionaire who owns the *Daily Bugle* building and the two buildings surrounding it," Venizelos explains. "We actually take positions of real places in New York so we can track back and say, 'This is where that goes.'

"We use all the bridges in the show, so New Yorkers will see them all in their proper places! For example, the George Washington Bridge is where the space shuttle crashes with Venom in it. Peter Parker lives in the same place he does in the comics [Forest Hills], a sleepy neighborhood, with quiet residential streets which hustles and bustle off into Manhattan.

"Although we haven't used the Statue of Liberty yet," Venizelos says, "we will, and the World Trade Center is always in the background in the city shots. Using New York, we've tried to get a more photo-realistic look; we're different from *Batman* and his city. New York is an actual setting, so we try to get a realistic look. We're trying to do a live-action show in animation."

Venizelos promises an especially realistic look for scenes when Spidey web-swings over New York. "We want to give it that vertigo look—you're actually up high, looking down and we'll have computer shots to give you a dizzy feeling," he says. "On most animated shows, there's a nonexistence of people and traffic, but on this, we'll have more attitude to the street scenes. You will see traffic and people moving in the streets and a lot of New York."

A film and art major in college,



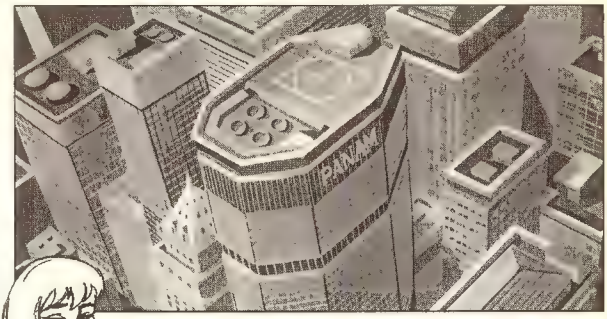
The hardest character for Venizelos to design was "Venom! Because he's so strange in the comics, we had to tone him down a bit."

Venizelos says his life was changed forever after he took his first animation class and liked it. He went to Los Angeles from San Francisco with his portfolio and was hired by Hanna-Barbera where he worked on *The Flintstones*, *Yogi Bear* and *Scooby Doo*. He then started with Marvel Productions in 1980.

"We did a series with Spidey called *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends*, which wasn't too good. Basically, nothing we did was with Marvel's intent, it was always somebody else's product." After leaving Marvel, Venizelos worked on *FernGully* as art director on backgrounds and then later art-directed background designs on *X-Men*. He left mutantville to join *Spider-Man*.

Venizelos' job entails character designs, cityscapes and backgrounds. "The art director is in charge of the show's look—getting it to look right," he explains. "We're trying to stay out of the Saturday morning genre by toning down everything. We want a lot more richness in tone and color."

The hardest character to design was "Venom! Because he's so strange in the comics, we had to tone him down a bit. He has all those teeth and drips from



Venizelos wants his New York to be as realistic as possible, but the Pan Am Building became the Met Life Building a few years ago.

According to Venizelos, the comics gave Mary Jane that "hair look," which was changed for the show, but now her bangs "look like cut-out boards."

Art: Todd McFarlane

Design & Layout: Evan Metcalf

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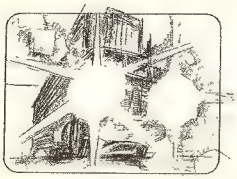
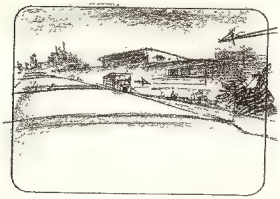


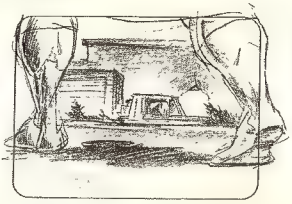
Its headlights go on.

Eddie's hand shifts the truck. Pan up with ooze to the man's face.

As ooze forms, the Venom costume around him. He/truck move off.

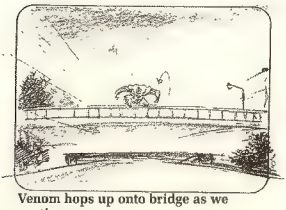


Truck animates up from the distance.

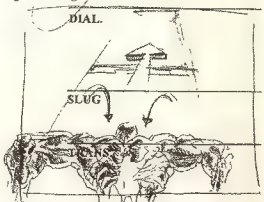


Truck animates up so that Spidey's legs in foreground frame it.

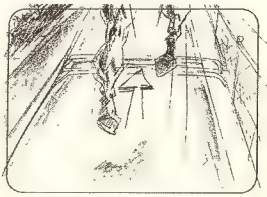
Venom, seen through truck window, honks at O.S. Spidey.



Venom hops up onto bridge as we continue away.

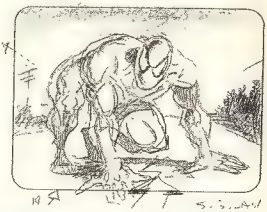


Venom anticipates as subway train continues through scene below.

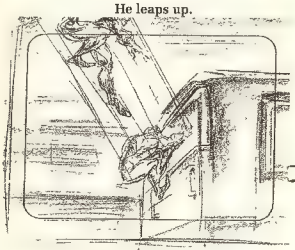


He leaps up.

Venom gets up as train recedes into distance.



Subway (and Spidey) animates away from camera.



Venom down into the scene and onto tail of last car.

the mouth, so we had to work out a way to subdue that. He only drips a little bit from the mouth now," the artist laughs.

Venizelos feels the key to Spider-Man is "constant movement! We had Spider-Man in here—a guy in the costume—for a photo shoot and shot him from every possible angle and direction, so now we can turn Spidey upside down and do whatever we want with him. There has been a great deal of research on animating him. Once you take a photo of a character like him, you can move him any way you want."

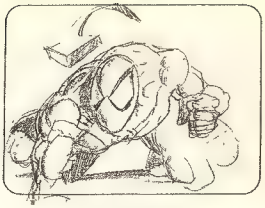
Spider-Man will eventually tackle villains created specially for the show. "Basically, we're going with certain comic characters and stories in the beginning," explains Venizelos, "but once the series starts rolling, we'll be developing new characters and surprises. Some characters we create might appear in the comics later, so it's give and take.

"We take from the comics and put a little more into it. Somebody like the Hobgoblin is taken from the comics, but we add a lot more shadow and highlights."

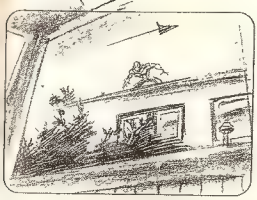
Spider-Man is one show that will definitely "bring on the bad guys." "We have 'em all," the artist declares, "Dr. Octopus, Shocker, Hydro Man, and Chameleon. I'm just starting to design the Kraven the Hunter show. He's a pretty charismatic character with a lot of stuff going for him. Kraven will have the Russian accent, too.

"There's going to be a lot of action; in one show, Spider-Man and Dr. Octopus fight in a rocket booster assembly plant. When Venom [the symbiote] comes down, he takes over Spider-Man, so Spidey will get his black costume in that episode. Spidey tries to fight it, but finds he gets more strength from Venom being in his body.

Sees something O.S.

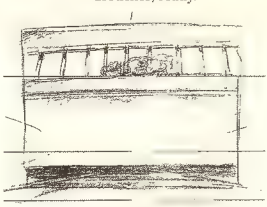


Crouches, ready.

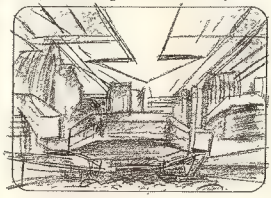


We are in foreground ("inside truck cab with Venom") gaining past Spidey on train (also moving—but more slowly)

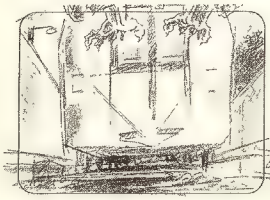
Slow 45 degree pan. Spidey looks.



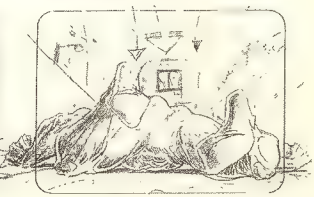
Venom leaps onto guard rail.



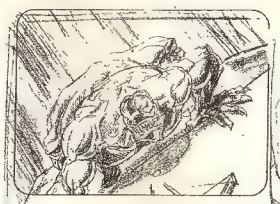
Subway train continues over camera—



—Then past and away from camera as Venom drops into scene—



—And onto tracks.



Venom climbs toward camera.

"Look, Parker, I'm booked for a round trip."

"The bigger characters like Kingpin and the Rhino are a little harder because of size comparison. Size is difficult—if the character is standing right next to a normal person and they're larger, you must make sure you get that correctly.

"My favorite was probably the first show, 'Night of the Lizard.' There's a nice transformation of Doc Connors into the Lizard and a lot of color. Color can bring a brilliance, but it has to be used correctly. You can't have a brilliant character against a brilliant background."

Classic villains like Dr. Octopus will have new modifications, like body armor, reveals Venizelos. "We try to update them a little bit. With the Vulture, we added more youth to him rather than have the old person he used to be [in the comics]. We've changed a little bit here and there, but the characters have to be OKed by Marvel's comic division if we change something. We're in constant contact with Marvel Comics."

For the second season, the animated *Spider-Man* will boast several never-before-adapted comics characters. "Morbius the living vampire will be here. He'll look like he does in the books, with the white skin and all. We're also in the process of doing a crossover with *X-Men*."

Background design artist Larry Kim, bringing illustrations in for Venizelos' approval, also adds that "you'll see a lot of the staff on the show in minor roles. I'm a camera operator in one episode," he laughs.

"That's the show's appeal," Dennis Venizelos smiles. "Everybody working on the animated *Spider-Man* is a comics fan. I've always liked Spidey; my daughters love me working on the show and my wife enjoys the fact that I'm working on a show I like, because I come home happy. Our goal is to give Spider-Man the best-looking show he could possibly have!" CS

My Dear Watson

Face it, Tiger. Voicing Mary Jane, Saratoga Ballantine just hit the jackpot!

By PAT JANKIEWICZ

Forget Wonder Woman, Phoenix, Batgirl and Rogue, the greatest female to ever grace a comic book was Mary Jane Watson. Possessing no super-powers, mutant abilities or overwhelming urge to do good or evil, the fast-talking redhead's only desire was to be popular and find a happening party.

Now Marvel's favorite "hippie chick" makes the scene on the TV screen in Fox's animated *Spider-Man*. The party girl's voice is provided by a vivacious, striking brunette, actress Saratoga Ballantine ("My dad is a gambler so he named me after the prettiest racetrack he knew, Saratoga!").

Ballantine, who has guested in numerous TV shows, is happy about the role. Her rendition of "Face it, tiger—you just hit the jackpot!" garnered her a standing ovation at the 1994 San Diego Comic Con. ("I was so thrilled; it felt great!")

"Mary Jane is terrific; she just wants to be a performer. I would want to be her best friend—Mary Jane is bright, funny and cute, all the qualities women want," the actress proclaims. "She doesn't seem to have a job on the side, so I don't know how she makes a living, but she *does* answer her phone, 'Mary Jane Watson, Supermodel!'

"What makes Mary Jane tremendous is that she has had a real rough childhood. Her father cut out, her sister got married but her husband left and her mother died, so she had all this responsibility and realizes she has to take care of herself. I read her background from the show's bible and some comic books I requested from Marvel so I could learn more about Mary Jane's past."

She's a good role model for girls because "Mary Jane seems to declare, 'Get out of your 12-step program and co-dependent meetings, release yourself from your dysfunctional family and get on with your life.' She really could have been a mess.

"In the comics, when they married her off, Mary Jane lost her oomph because she's a wife now and isn't out pursuing her dream—a big lesson for us single gals," she smiles. "If I got married, I wouldn't be able to run around doing these crazy things!"

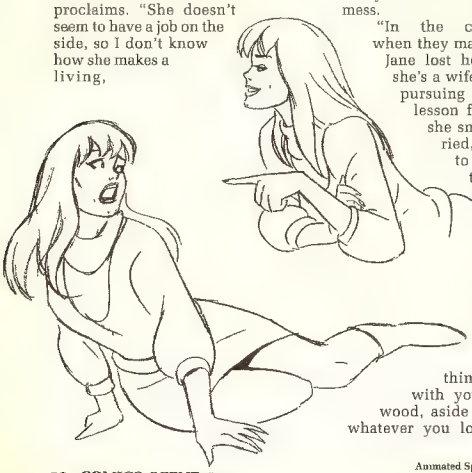
Her approach to the character is, "I keep my voice lower and sexier for Mary Jane. It's a very sexy cartoon with a lot going for it. With your voice, you can do a lot more things than you can with your face. In Hollywood, aside from Lon Chaney, whatever you look like, that's all they'll see you as! But with your voice, you can manipulate it all kinds of ways. It's a much more liberating thing. Most actors love animation; I really do."

Ballantine was impressed with her animated alter-ego. "The first time I saw Mary Jane, I thought she was awesome! She is so sexy, so hot, just your fantasy of how you want to be. You know that girl never has a bad day! Her hair looks good, her body is together even though she never seems to go to the gym. It's just amazing!"

The actress "hit the jackpot" when "I auditioned for the show in October [1993] and they gave me two little lines to read as Mary Jane and then gave me some more information about the character and asked me to create my own thing. I wrote a monologue incorporating her life—I knew she was independent.

"Mary Jane is terrific. I would want to be her best friend!" says Saratoga Ballantine, voice of the woman behind Spider-Man.

Photos: Lisa Orris



Animated Spider-Man Art & Model Sheets: Courtesy Marvel Films Animation

"Mary Jane wants to be an actress, so she studies Shakespeare. It was important to them that the person who could do the part had an understanding of that. Last week on the show, I was doing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at a Brooklyn dinner theater but Peter didn't make it to the show because he had to be Spider-Man somewhere. I really had to do Shakespeare in it and I thought, 'This is so symbiotic—all of *my* talents are coming to bear!'

"They called me back months later and had me read with five potential Spider-Men to see how we connected. They were all good, but Christopher Barnes was exceptional. We had a great chemistry and he had the humor; Peter Parker is very sarcastic and Chris really had that nailed."

Ballantine has nothing but praise for her Peter Parker. "Chris is an amazing person. He's very young to have such an old soul, his timing rivals any comedic actor I've ever worked with and he's very focused and confident. He makes Peter Parker come alive.

"On the show, I don't know that he's Spider-Man, but I'm starting to get suspicious. As Mary Jane, I know Peter Parker and I've met Spider-Man, too, and like him, but I don't know they're the same person...yet.

"We have a great time working on the show—we all tape it together in a booth, everybody next to each other, and I don't think we've had one tense day. We've had some really cool people; everybody wants to do the show and it's attracting a great deal of celebrity interest. Martin Landau was a villain [the Scorpion] and Mark Hamill was incredible," she marvels. "His Hobgoblin is really great; Mark is such a performer that even a little line becomes a mini-series. He's so rich and full of character.

"Nell Carter plays Gloria Grant and Ed Asner is J. Jonah Jameson. He's a genius—I've worked with him on almost every episode. I sit next to him so I can learn. Ed is a swell, low-key guy. He likes the way I smell," she laughs. "That's important to me!

"I adore Aunt May—she has been very good to me," Ballantine declares. "Linda Gary does her voice and she's the queen of cartoons; Linda has done a million cartoons. It's fun to watch this hip blonde become Aunt May! Linda is a Teri Garr-like woman who in one moment can become very mature!

"My Aunt Anna has been mentioned but not cast yet. I'm trying to keep up with all the guests! They brought in a girl last week to be my friend Liz Allen. Liz has a sexy little voice and Peter likes her, too. We haven't had a catfight yet!

"[Story editor/producer] John Semper is always at our tapings, as is voice director Tony Kaster. Surprise guests drop in, like Stan Lee, which is exciting. I think Stan is the coolest and I would marry him in a second!" Ballantine pauses and smiles. "Well, let's not get into that! He has that fast, New York energy. Stan's like a Damon Runyon character."

Ballantine actually hails from Spidey-country. "I'm from New York originally; I was born in Manhattan. I thought I was grown up really young," she states. "When I was five, I wore a tiara and high heels, and called my parents by their first names!

"My father [Carl Ballantine, an actor seen as one of *McHale's Navy* crew] is a magician, 'The Amazing Ballantine,' so I grew up watching magic and knowing that I wanted to be a performer. I wanted to do something exciting like magic!"

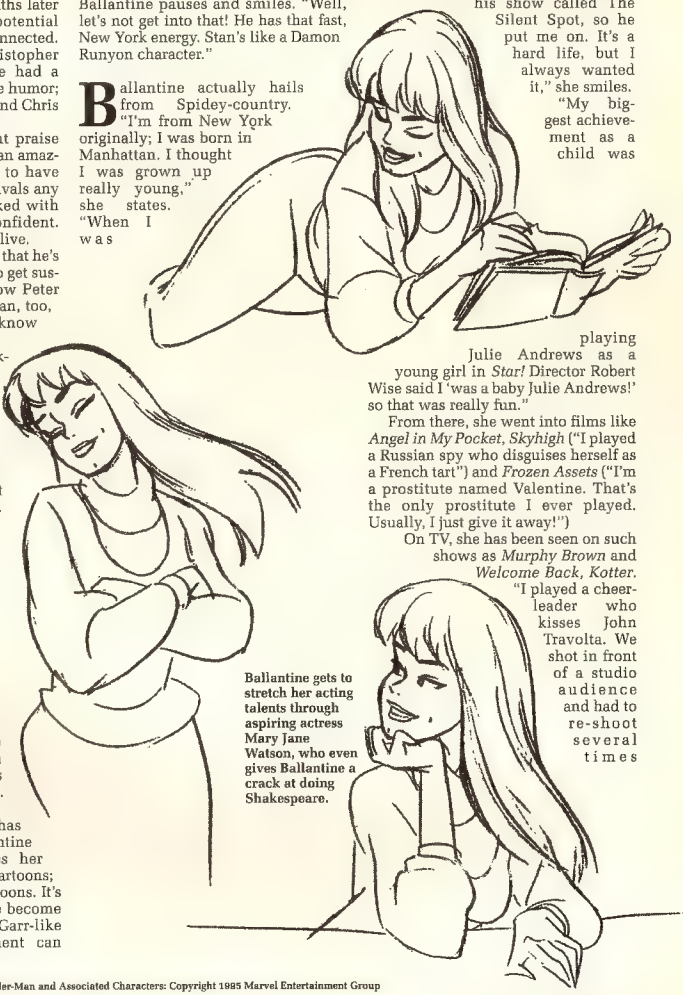
Ballantine's career began when "I was nine years old and Red Skelton saw me in [the play] *Gypsy*. I was a mime and Skelton had a segment on his show called The Silent Spot, so he put me on. It's a hard life, but I always wanted it," she smiles.

"My biggest achievement as a child was playing Julie Andrews as a young girl in *Star!* Director Robert Wise said I 'was a baby Julie Andrews!' so that was really fun."

From there, she went into films like *Angel in My Pocket*, *Skyhigh* ("I played a Russian spy who disguises herself as a French tart") and *Frozen Assets* ("I'm a prostitute named Valentine. That's the only prostitute I ever played. Usually, I just give it away!")

On TV, she has been seen on such shows as *Murphy Brown* and *Welcome Back, Kotter.*

"I played a cheerleader who kisses John Travolta. We shot in front of a studio audience and had to re-shoot several times



Ballantine gets to stretch her acting talents through aspiring actress Mary Jane Watson, who even gives Ballantine a crack at doing Shakespeare.

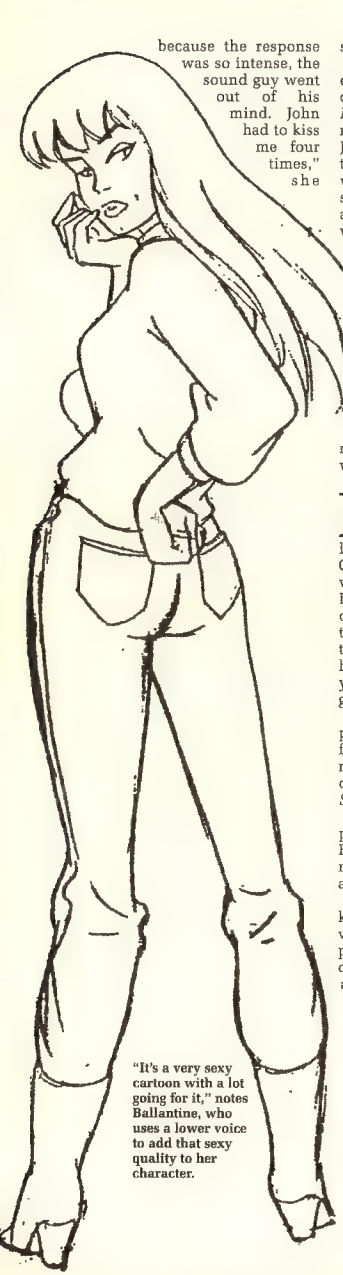
Design & Layout: Evan Metcalf

All Spider-Man and Associated Characters: Copyright 1985 Marvel Entertainment Group

because the response was so intense, the sound guy went out of his mind. John had to kiss me four times," she sighs. "I thought I was gonna faint!"

Ballantine's most unusual film experience came in Brian DePalma's cult horror musical *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974). "That was my first real movie. I was in a workshop run by Jerzy Grotowski, the Polish drama teacher, doing exercises where we were trees and snakes. Brian DePalma saw it, I got to audition for the movie and went to Dallas to make it for six weeks.

"I played a lot of parts in it, which was cool. They used my dancing and acting skills and I even sang a little. I was one of the crow-women at the wedding; I was in black- and white-face, stitching Captain Beef [Gerrit Graham] in a coffin and I'm on a bed crooning for Swan [Bill Finley, the Phantom]. I also wore a green afro wig and a G-string and danced across the stage when a man gets electrocuted. My parents were so proud," she giggles.



"It's a very sexy cartoon with a lot going for it," notes Ballantine, who uses a lower voice to add that sexy quality to her character.

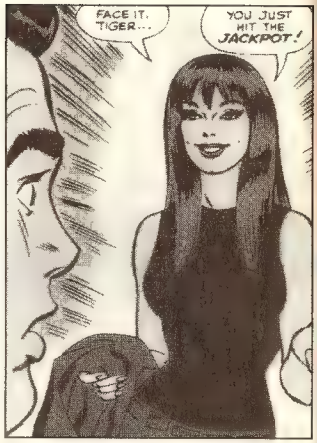
Ballantine is ambivalent about her most recognizable role. "Most people know my most famous line—it's from a Starkist Tuna Commercial, my first big cartoon job. I was a goldfish who says [in ditzy Bronx accent], 'Oh, Charlie, Starkist doesn't want tuna with good taste, they want tuna that tastes good!' I did that for five years, the best job I ever had," the performer smiles. "All those years of Shakespearean training didn't go to waste!

"I haven't done much animation—I played one of the *Ghostbusters*' girl friends once—so this is a big thing for me. They were very adamant that they didn't want 'cartoon people' for *Spider-Man*, they wanted *actors*.

"Last week was my first episode 'in peril.' I finally get to be in peril," Ballantine jokes. "Mary Jane is kidnapped by the Chameleon and thrown around, so I had to scream a lot.

"In that same episode, I had my first kiss with Peter Parker, but it really wasn't Peter, it was the Chameleon posing as Peter," she smiles. "The director wanted me to really get into it and moan, excited about my first kiss. We kept doing it over and over and we were all getting a little moist. Maxwell Caulfield, a regular on the show, dubbed me 'The Moan Queen.' It's good to be the queen!"

Ballantine is happy with the animated *Spider-Man*. "I've loved every one of the stories. When a script comes, it almost feels like I've got a movie script because everything is written out so well and they describe everything so completely. I'm partial to the Hobgoblin episode right now, because that was really exciting. I also loved the one where I got to do Shakespeare; it was written by John Semper. When I was in peril, I was on every page and being the ham that I am, I loved it!"



Art: John Romita

Peter Parker was not the only one who hit the jackpot when Mary Jane debuted in 1966. Fans have enjoyed the pair's rollercoaster relationship ever since.

Although she wasn't a big comics fan as a kid—"I didn't read *Spider-Man* because it was for *boys*"—Saratoga Ballantine is happy to voice a comic-book legend. "It's the most exciting thing," she laughs. "I do a lot of theater in town, but when I get to act on camera, I'm usually 'the secretary,' 'the clerk' or 'the maid.' I haven't played Scarlett O'Hara, so Mary Jane is the most famous person I've been!

"It's a cute and famous thing that Mary Jane calls people 'Tiger,' " the actress smiles. "I find I'm calling everybody 'Tiger' now, so life is imitating art!"

When talking about her alter-ego, Ballantine tends to gush. "She is so sexy, so hot, just your fantasy of how you want to be."

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Art: James D. Kester

Visitor

(continued from page 49)

"Many people have this mentality that, 'It's a Valiant book, so it's a great story, but the art is so-so.' If you really look at the books coming out for the last couple of months from Valiant, that's really not true. There are many really good artists here, like Sean Chen and Rags Morales, and we're all very young and still learning. But we're growing. Hopefully, fans will pick up *The Visitor* and say, 'This is the *new* Valiant!' We're trying to bring the fun back into comics, like keeping the Visitor's identity a secret. This is an entertainment industry and we want to keep the fans happy and interested in the characters."

VanHook always hoped to write an all-out superhero comic book, and was thrilled to be chosen to script *The Visitor*. "For a long time, I had wanted to do something in the straight-out superhero genre without the trappings of some of the other superhero stuff I had done. I had constraints on *Solar* because he had god-like powers and there was only so much stuff you could throw at him before it became pointless. Bloodshot was a person with heightened abilities, and I wanted to do something more on a straight superhero-class level like a Superman, something that I could have fun with and do the kind of stories that I enjoyed as a kid."

The secret of *The Visitor* has been planned for quite some time, says the artist. "When I first came to Valiant two years ago, I was at a big creative meeting about upcoming projects. I remember [Valiant execs] Steve Massarsky, Jon Hartz and Bob Layton discussing the general premise of *The Visitor*. It was going to be the last regular Valiant series, and it was going to come out around January 1995. At that time, I was just working on my first inventory story. It was wishful thinking to even hope I would be working on this book! They said it would be their flagship title. Until now, *X-O* has been their flagship title, but they're really pushing *The Visitor* as Valiant's *Superman*."

The Visitor will be different from any of Valiant's other superhero-oriented titles. "He's pretty mysterious," says Chang. "The reader won't really know that much about him. We'll know that he's a good guy from the actions that we see, but his past is clouded and mysterious, hidden from the people. That kind of mystery will get readers even more involved—you can write down each of his actions on a little scorecard, and start building an identity for this person. When we finally do reveal *who* the Visitor is, then the whole picture will clear up. It'll come full circle, and we'll realize why certain things were done."

Artistically, Chang plans to make *The Visitor* something more than just another straight-out superhero book. "I'm trying to add a bit more to it," he says. "*Mirage* had a romantic flair to it, not just with the storyline but with the artwork as well. The lines were a lot softer. I'm going to be concentrating a lot on tempo and pacing, where we go from secondary panels into money shots. We're pacing the action that way. Not only is there a lot of nice, fun drawing where I get to draw fun scenes of these guys punching each other, the tempo of the storytelling goes along like a song. We hit a crescendo, then a decrescendo, then maybe speed it up again. Kevin has been writing a lot of stuff and allowing me to incorporate interesting visuals that go along with the story. Bob McLeod's inks are sharp and crisp; the blacks are strong."

From an artistic standpoint, Chang says his biggest challenge is to keep fans interested in *every* page of the book. "I'm also striving for consistency from page one to page 24. Many artists just draw nice big flashy scenes or panels, but if you constantly have a lot of those, it's like turning the music on full blast 24 hours a day. After a while, that loud music becomes dull. I'm trying to turn it up, then down, then up; vary it. That makes the big scenes more important, and a subtle scene after it lets you rest for a little while, and come back again on the next page with a big shot of Harbinger or Visitor. That way, we establish more of a superhero presence. The previous work I've been doing has been very subtle and soft. I enjoyed it a lot, because it enabled me to experience more and experiment with pacing and storytelling, using the reader's eye as a motion tool. As the eye goes from the top of the panel to the bottom, it's like a movie camera panning from top to bottom. We're incorporating little techniques like that."

Both Chang and VanHook are confident that *The Visitor* will become a favorite for longtime Valiant fans and new readers alike. "*The Visitor* is a really strong jumping-on point," promises Kevin VanHook. "From a writer's point-of-view, I've had a great deal of time to concentrate on this series and concept, and I've really worked to develop something to bring on new readers. It's indicative of the future at Valiant; the quality level is jumping up quite a bit this winter and beyond. This is definitely going to be one of the best-looking new titles in a long time. And of all the things I'm working on now, *The Visitor* is my driving focus!"

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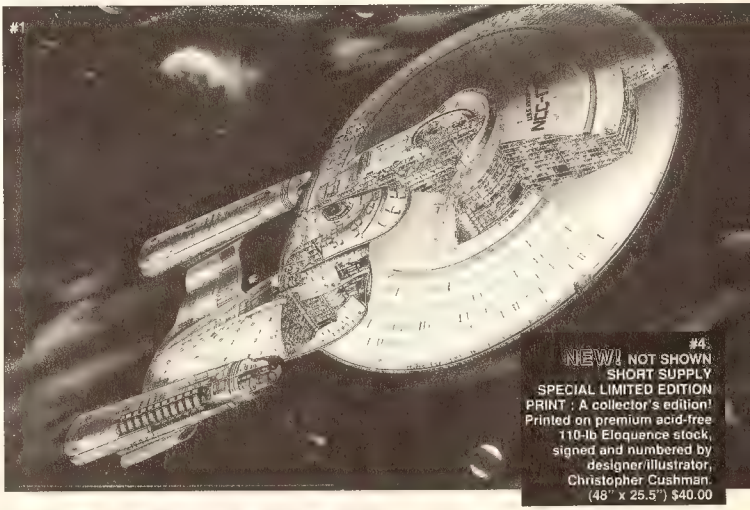

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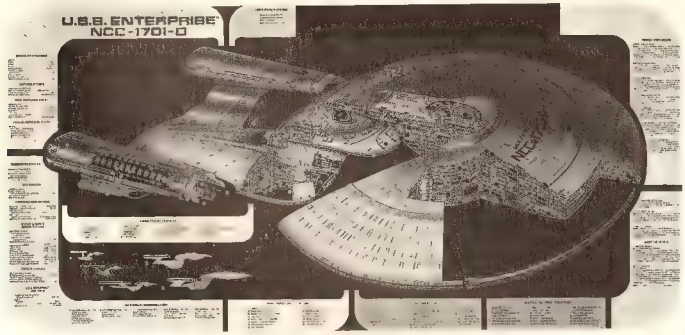

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Cage

(continued from page 27)

between two worlds and trying to preserve the integrity of his ways, and his culture, in the face of the onslaught of an alien culture.

"In a similar light, the Silver Surfer is like the Sub-Mariner out of water and in space. Again, there's this kind of duality of existence. The Silver Surfer carries out a lot of Stan Lee's sense of humanism and moral responsibility and also the kind of tragic, sad awareness of the human condition, and yet the kind of noble quality of admiring those who have the courage to live while recognizing where it all ends. The Silver Surfer in the *Marvel Action Hour* emerges, in terms of the actor playing his voice and what he says, to be just what the Surfer *should* be, and to sound just the way the Surfer should sound. I'm very pleased with that. The Surfer has a noble sadness. He doesn't have world-weariness, which is a kind of cynical giving up, but a recognition of the totality of life experience and of what an infinitesimal sparkle life is on a bleak universe.

"I find Tony Stark as Iron Man really intriguing too," Friedman says, "in many ways, because again there is this kind of duality. Tony Stark is physically infirmed, and yet, when he puts on the armor of Iron Man, he becomes this super-being. However, his liberation is also his prison. The duality of character is what impresses me, because I think that's always a great paradigm of the human condition. We're always trying to look with laughter and amusement on the cards Fate deals us and yet, when the hand is laid down on the table, we know we're not going to win every time."

Marvel has had limited success in the movies. Audiences wait with high expectations for the James Cameron *Spider-Man* film, but the spectres of *Captain America*, *The Punisher* and *The Fantasic Four* cast foreboding shadows on Marvel's film projects. Friedman responds confidently, "I'll put it this way. *All* of the examples mentioned came to pass under a different form of Marvel doing business. Frankly, since the arrival of [Marvel exec] Avi Arad, there is a new fix, a new view which treasures Stan Lee's input, which doesn't remove him from the creative process, and which, I think, selects people far more likely to do a credible job. Avi Arad's vision is one that is going to help ensure that the quality of the interpretation will be high rather than indifferent or ridiculous." Ron Friedman adds, "*Luke Cage* is going to happen. Stan wants it to happen. Ed Pressman wants it to happen. Everybody wants it to happen, so it will."

Breyfogle

(continued from page 45)

done any writing in a long time, and never written anything that long and epic in scope."

Breyfogle describes the book as "an inner journey...the coming-of-age of a modern young man." Set in a virtual reality dream research laboratory, *Metaphysique* features teams of "oneironauts," who go into trances and enter each other's dreams while fighting to overcome their own personal neuroses, which take the form of nightmares.

"The choreography of the characters, the way they all interrelate, is based on the chakra system," Breyfogle reveals. "It's an ancient Eastern Indian system of subtle energy bodies that supposedly lie along the spine and throughout the body and possess different psychological qualities. I don't know or care whether they physically exist, but they represent psychological states of mind that we all experience."

Metaphysique's main character represents the crown chakra, the most abstract of the chakras. Says Breyfogle, "It's at the top of the head, and it represents our closest connection to the absolute abstract, or, if you will, the spiritual." The lowest chakra, the root, is represented in *Metaphysique* by a character called Monomachy, the closest connection to the absolutely concrete, the physical plane.

If Breyfogle is taking a personal quantum leap by handling the scripting chores, it sounds as if he's not compounding the gamble by drastically altering his drawing style for the book. "I had to design a great deal of science-fiction hardware, which I've never done before, but basically my techniques are pretty much the same, I guess," he concedes. "My drawing style has been a slow growth and extrapolation from what I've done before, so this mini-series isn't going to be a radical change." *Metaphysique* does, however, feature painted covers, as well as a fully-painted prologue and epilogue.

Breyfogle estimates he can pencil and ink a full page a day, on average. Part of his efficiency is the result of hiring his brother back in Michigan as his assistant. Breyfogle says, "When I get a script, I thumbnail everything out. I get a lot of detail in them, since they're about three inches by six inches. Then, I send them to my brother who enlarges them with a projector. When I get them back enlarged on the final stock paper, I'm ready to start inking. He saves me about an hour per page."

In 1993, Eclipse Comics published a comics anthology by Breyfogle titled *Metaphysique*. The artist insists, however, that that project bears only a tangential relationship to his work for Bravura. The all-new *Metaphysique* focuses on the legacy of Orville Drew, ex-preacher and mind researcher who, in the '60s, opens a facility called the Meta Program Institute. Very much a misty-eyed dreamer, Drew seeks enlightenment through meditation, dreamwork and technology. His rival, the utterly pragmatic Dietrich Mater, loses his fiancée to the Institute and Drew's world-view. Pretending to be Drew's friend, Mater bides his time until he can inject a psychedelic poison into Drew's isolation tank.

Poor Orville subsequently has a hallucination in which he meets three beings of light who endow him with metapsychic powers and tell him the location of a power key. He later unearths this key and names it Exigesis.

According to Breyfogle, Drew as Metaphysique has an undefined degree of power. "He epitomizes $E=mc^2$. With the force of his will, he can take on any form. He has all kinds of telepathic and precognitive powers. He can fly, disappear, withstand an H-bomb. He's like a meta-mystical Superman."

According to Breyfogle, superheroics are a very vital part of the story. "If you could project any image you wanted, you would probably look superheroic: trim, athletic, muscular, handsome. Superheroes aren't just adolescent power fantasies. They're ideal physical forms, representing idealized states of mind."

However, don't expect non-stop, rock'em-sock'em slugfests. "What it gets down to is an ideological conflict," maintains Breyfogle. "The superheroics are an outward manifestation of the inner conflicts that occur. It's not just mindless action. Every conflict has a much more character-driven meaning."

Whether the story he has devised for *Metaphysique* will win the approval of readers remains a mystery. "I don't know how well it will do. Marketing is a real enigma to me. I just know what I like. Luckily, what I like to draw is usually what the fans like," Breyfogle says.

But isn't what the fans like primarily non-stop action? "I can understand that," concedes Breyfogle. "As an artist, action scenes are much more fun to draw than interaction scenes, talking scenes."

Even if the *Metaphysique* mini-series isn't a popular success, Breyfogle promises, "I'm going to be writing further chapters sometime in the future."

Above all, he says the book reflects a personal search for meaning. "What I'm trying to express in *Metaphysique* is my attempt to meld the concrete and the abstract, to find a bridge between opposites," says Norm Breyfogle.

Like between comics and philosophy, perhaps?

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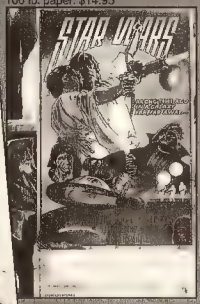

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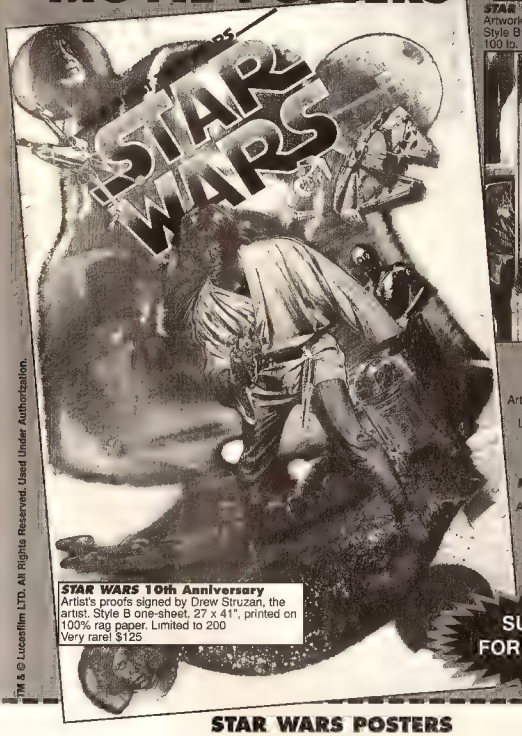

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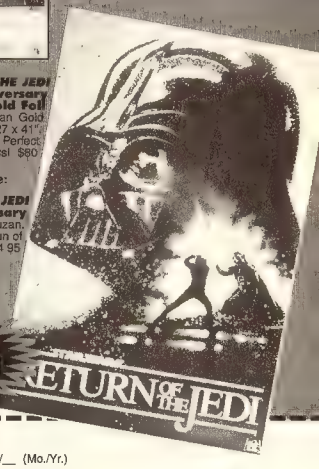

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Goyer

(continued from page 12)

they'd had a story, they would have been great!

"*Superman, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *The Crow* all captured the comics. The *Captain America* and *Punisher* movies were awful. As a writer, you can't avoid some of the pitfalls because you're not in control; the *Captain America* screenplay [which writer Stephen Tolkin discussed in CS #12] was actually quite good, but they made it a B-movie, so it was doomed from the start. As for *The Punisher*, he should have been the easiest Marvel character to film, you wouldn't have to change *anything*. I will never understand how they screwed him up—they didn't even keep his skull outfit. That was stupid."

As for the future, Goyer has another "Marvelous" assignment. "I'm doing *Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* for Fox TV," he explains. "It's going to be a two-hour movie that will also serve as a pilot. I've always loved *S.H.I.E.L.D.* and Nick Fury. Right now we're deciding how much to keep."

The gruff spy has bounced around Hollywood since the mid-80s, developed by the likes of Debra (*The Fisher King*) Hill and Walter (*The Warriors*) Hill. "I read some of the scripts done on the character, including the one Debra Hill developed, and I must say I wasn't impressed," Goyer notes.

"I'm writing it and will have executive producer credit with Stan Lee and Avi Arad. I want to be true to the character. Fury will have the eyepatch, Life Model Decoys and the *S.H.I.E.L.D.* Heli-carrier—that's our main set, it will be [a gathering place] like the Bridge of the *Enterprise*. We will emphasize that *S.H.I.E.L.D.* works for the UN. They did in the comics, but I always thought they were too American, so this will be a multinational cast.

"Dum-Dum Dugan [Nick's loyal pal] will probably be in there. Hydra's in it for sure, and I would like to bring in AIM [the evil Advanced Idea Mechanics group] and even The Hand from *Daredevil*. If it becomes a series, I would also love to have Nick's brother Jacob Fury as Scorpio."

The writer reflects on his good fortune. "The Eye of Agamotto comic shop started it all for me. It was run by a guy named Norm and I hung out there. It was the best comic shop I was ever in and I have fond memories of it. Originally, I wanted to be a comic book artist, and I did drawings which Norm put on the wall. I started writing instead and now I am where I am," David S. Goyer grins. "Norm, if you're out there, 'Thank you!' "

Mickey's Brain

Mickey Mouse Loses His Mind: Yes, it's true! It happens in "Runaway Brain," the first Mickey Mouse short in 35 years. It follows the much longer Mickey vehicles of the '80s (*Mickey's Christmas Carol*, *The Prince and the Pauper*). Disney's animation unit in Paris has been producing this short since April 1994, it is scheduled to be completed this April and released this summer. "Brain" is being handled by first-time director Chris Bailey, who animated the cat's mouth for the live-action film *Hocus Pocus*. Andreas Deja is overseeing character animation.

In "Brain," Mickey is the guinea pig of a mad scientist called Dr. Frankenollie (a sly reference to legendary Disney animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston). Frankenollie switches Mickey's mind with that of the monster he builds: Peg Leg Pete. But, Pete may no longer be referred to as "Peg Leg Pete" or "Black Pete." Why? Because these are the hypersensitive 1990s. After the brouhaha over some lyrics in *Aladdin*, Disney wants to avoid offending the physically disadvantaged and ethnic minorities

You Can't Keep a Good Dog Down: When MGM/United Artists released *All Dogs Go to Heaven* in 1989, the Don Bluth film was critically lambasted. It grossed a disappointing $29 million, compared to glowing reviews and an $82 million gross for its rival, Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. But in late 1990, MGM/UA Home Video sold more than four million cassettes of *All Dogs*, earning over four times the box office take. So, there *will* be an *All Dogs Go to Heaven 2*, to be released in 1996. Originally meant to be direct-to-video, the project is now a $20 million feature, made by the Irish studio once run by Don Bluth. Bluth, now working for 20th Century Fox in Phoenix, is not involved with this sequel.

The director is Larry Leker, who previously art-directed *The Goofy Movie*. He had also storyboarded and designed the original *All Dogs Go To Heaven* with Don Bluth. Charlie Sheen replaces Burt Reynolds as the voice of Charlie B. Barkin, the German Shepherd who cons his way out of Heaven once more to help a runaway boy named David. Charlie's dachshund sidekick, Itchy, is again voiced by the ubiquitous Dom DeLuise, while Ernest Borgnine replaces the late Vic Tayback as Carface, the ugly pit bull. New characters include Red, a demonic cat, and Sasha, a gorgeous Irish Setter voiced and sung by Sheena Easton.

Before Bluth went out of business in 1992, his Special Projects division in Burbank actively pitched spinoffs for *All Dogs* and *A Troll in Central Park* for Saturday morning TV.

March Roars Like a Penguin: This March, MGM will release Bluth's *The Pebble and the Penguin* (originally *Romeo and the Rockhopper*). Martin Short voices Hubie, a shy penguin out to win the affections of Marina (Annie Golden) by presenting her with the prettiest pebble he can find at the Full Moon Ceremony. (This is inspired by the mating ritual of the Adeli Penguins.) Jim Belushi voices Rocko the Rockhopper, who has aspirations of flying, and Tim Curry

Pebble Art: Copyright 1994 Don Bluth Ltd. & MGM Inc.

Off on a watery adventure this spring are Hubie (voiced by Martin Short) and sidekick Rocko (Jim Belushi) in *The Pebble and the Penguin*.

is the virile Drake (echoing Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast*), who wants Marina as his own love bird. Rachel Koretsky and Steve Whitestone wrote the story, which was produced by Don Bluth Ireland Ltd. Barry Manilow composed the original score, and the songs are by Manilow and Bruce Sussman.

New Jonny Quest Team: On the *Quest* unit, Takashi has replaced Dick Sebast as producer. Takashi had previously worked with story editor Peter Lawrence on *Peter Pan & the Pirates*. They're currently co-producing 26 episodes that will star a slightly older Jonny.

Jonny's Global Impact is the new title for *Jonny's Global Questions*, a new Jonny Quest adventure. The two-hour TV movie is slated to air on TNT this fall. Producer/director is Mario Piluso; teleplay is by David Bennett Carren and J. Larry Carroll (STARLOG PLATINUM EDITION #1); executive producers are William Hanna, Joseph Barbera and Buzz Potamkin.

ANIMATION SCENE

Dogs Art: Copyright 1995 MGM Inc.

The voices are different, but the canine characters are the same when *All Dogs Go to Heaven* gets a sequel.

Hanna-Barbera Makes More Movies: A few months ago, the unit that made *Once Upon a Forest*, *Pagemaster* and now *Cat's Don't Dance* became Turner Pictures, under the leadership of executive producer David Kirschner. Now, Hanna-Barbera is starting another feature division, with two titles in the works: *October Moon*, a werewolf movie; and *Space Ghost*. Joy Every is H-B's vice-president of feature development.

Another New Kid on the Block: Nickelodeon Movies joins the feature animation bandwagon, but with a difference. "There's a whole *world* of animation out there; it can be more than just singing dogs and talking dinosaurs," says Jerry Beck, the new division's VP of Animation. He wants to avoid what the other studios are doing, musical fantasies such as:

Disney: *The Goofy Movie*, *Pocahontas*, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Hercules*, *Fantasia Continued*.

Turner: *Cats Don't Dance*.

Rich Entertainment: *The Swan Princess*, *Feathertop*

Amblin: *Balto*, *Cats*.

Warners. *Phantom of the Opera* (tentative).

Bluth/MGM: *The Pebble and the Penguin*

MGM: *All Dogs Go to Heaven 2*.

Don Bluth/Fox: *Rapunzel* (tentative).

Jerry Beck will executive produce new theatrical and made-for-TV films for Nickelodeon. Previously, he had served as a creative consultant for Harvey Entertainment on *The Baby Huey Show*. In 1989, he co-founded Streamline Pictures with *Robotech*'s Carl Macek. He wrote the recently-published *50 Greatest Cartoons*, plus *I Tawt I Taw a Puddy Tat*, and with Will Friedwald, *Looney Toons and Merry Melodies*, the definitive filmography to Warner Bros. shorts.

The Orion Connection: Orion Pictures Corporation has signed with Streamline Pictures to mass-market their library of Japanese animation. The first Orion editions appeared November 23, at a sell-through price of $19.95 each: *Akira*, *Dirty Pair: Affair on Nolandia*, *Fist of the North Star*, *The Professional: Golgo 13*, *Robotech II: The Sentinels* and *Vampire Hunter D*. Another set of six titles will be available February 21: *Dirty Pair: Flight 005 Conspiracy*, *Dirty Pair: Project Eden*, *Great Conquest: The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, *Lily-C.A.T.*, *Lupin III's Greatest Capers*

(containing the two Miyazaki-directed episodes of *Lupin III*), and *3 x 3 Eyes Perfect Collection* (the four *3 x 3 Eyes* separate videos.)

The 22nd Annual Annie Awards were held November 12 at the Academy Plaza theater. Presented by the Hollywood chapter of ASIFA, the International Animated Film Society, the "Annies" honored animated productions and individuals whose works were released between August 1, 1993 and July 31, 1994.

This year's host was Mark Hamill, who was also nominated for his voice work as the Joker. Seated several rows back in the auditorium, Hamill had to hustle to the stage in between presentations. "I've got to cut down on my commute time," he quipped. The presenters were Lucille Bliss, Tom Sito, Bill Kroyer, Marc Davis, Bill Littlejohn, Joe Grant, June Foray, Bob

Also earning a well-deserved Winsor McCay Award was the legendary Jean VanderPyl (here with her two sons), voice of Wilma Flintstone.

All ASIFA Photos: Kathy Turner Photography

Kurtz, Bill Hurtz and John Canemaker.

The Lion King won for Outstanding Achievement in an Animated Feature Production over *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*. Other *Lion* winners were Brenda Chapman for Story Contribution and Jeremy Irons for Voice Acting. *Nightmare Before Christmas* benefited from awards earned by director Henry Selick (Outstanding Creative Supervision) and art director Deane Taylor (Artistic Excellence).

The Simpsons won Outstanding Achievement in an Animated Television Program for the third year in a row, beating *Animaniacs*, *Batman: The Animated Series*, *The Critic* and *The Ren and Stimpy Show*.

"Sax Man" from Duck Soup Productions won for Television Commercial; Lumivision's *Animated Legend, Winsor McCay* won Animated Home Video Release; and Lucas Arts Entertainment Co. won Animated CD-ROM for *Rebel Assault*.

Animation Scene columnist Bob Miller pauses with voiceover virtuouso Lucille Bliss.

This year's recipients of the Winsor McCay Award—which recognizes lifetime achievements in the animation field: Ed Benedict, who designed Hanna-Barbera's earliest TV characters, including *The Flintstones*; Screen Gems, Warners and DePatie-Freleng director Art Davis; and Jean VanderPyl, the voice of Wilma and Pebbles Flintstone, Rosie the Robot, Winsome Witch, and Ma and Floral Rugg (*The Hillbilly Bears*).

For more information, write ASIFA/Hollywood, 725 S. Victory Blvd., Burbank, CA 91502; phone (818) 842-8330; FAX (818) 842-5645.

ASIFA/Hollywood's next big event is the Animation Opportunities Expo, in which studios will be reviewing portfolios and animation reels, plus have panel discussions about the industry. This unique jobs fair will be held March 11, 1995 at the Beverly Garland Hotel, 4222 Vineland Avenue, North Hollywood, CA.

June Foray congratulates veteran animation director Art Davis, honored with the Winsor McCay Award for lifetime achievement.

Eight Man Returns: He's back in a four-volume OVA series imported by Streamline Pictures, updating the superhero into a violent, bloody cyberpunk world.

Who's Eight Man? Like RoboCop, he's a cyborg, built from the body of a murdered policeman. Unlike RoboCop, he can cloak his metal body and appear as a human. The character first appeared in *manga* by Mitsuteru Yokoyama, creator of *Iron Man 28* (*Gigantor*). *Eight Man* became one of the first Japanese cartoons, with 56 episodes produced by the TCJ Animation Center in late 1963. Joe Oriolo Productions, the producers of the first *Felix the Cat* TV show, translated the series for Americans as *The Eighth Man*, released in 1985. Only two people know the cyborg's identity: Professor Tani (renamed

Eight Man After **returns in a four-volume OVA series imported by Streamline.**

After Art: Copyright 1993 Kazunao Hirai/Jiro Kuwata/ACT Co., Ltd

Professor Genius for the Americans), the scientist who turns him into Eight Man (Tobor), and police chief Inspector Tanaka (Chief Fumblethumbs). Eight Man's human identity is that of a private investigator, Azama, whose wife, Sachiko Yokugawa, suspects his secret.

After the first series, Eight Man dies.

The new OVA series, *Eight Man After*, chronicles what happens next. Private investigator Itsuro Hazama (Steve Bulen) is viciously murdered, but resuscitated as a new Eight Man by Professor Tani (Dan Woren). (The similarity of Hazama to Azama, the original Eight Man, is an intentional quirk of fate.) Sachiko Yokugawa (Mari Devon, who voiced Summer Gleeson on *Batman*) meets and falls in love with Itsuro, unaware that he's the new Eight Man. Meanwhile, Inspector Tanaka (Mike Reynolds) has to contend with gangs of "cyber-junkies," street punks who replace their arms and legs with prosthetic weapons. So, the new Eight Man has to disarm them, literally. Pretty bloody stuff, folks.

Note that Streamline has maintained the original Japanese names of the cast. The English language version is produced and directed by Carl Macek, with ADR dialogue by Ardwight Chamberlain (original voice of Dynamo Duck on the Fox Network). *Eight Man After* was directed by Sumiyoshi Furukawa, from a screenplay by Yasushi Hirano. Each 30-minute video retails for $14.95. Volume Four has just been released.

Other Video Comics From Streamline: *Lily C.A.T.* is a streamlined OVA horror feature in the tradition of *ALIEN*. On the starship *Saldes*, a 13-man crew is terrorized by an elusive alien life form. Something seizes control of the computer, and two crew members turn out to be impostors. Gross stuff includes a screaming cat severed in half and people splitting apart with blood gushing. The *Wicked City* trailer at the end (also on *Eight Man After*, Volume 1) contains some disturbing images. Not for the squeamish.

Produced in 1987 by Studio Pierro Co., Victor Music Co., Ltd., directed by Hisayuki Toriumi, with designs by Yasuomi Umetsu (*Megazone 23, Part Two*) and Yoshitaki Amano (*Vampire Hunter D*). The English language version was produced and directed by Carl Macek, with English dialogue written and directed by Gregory Snegoff. *Lily-C.A.T.* lasts 70 minutes, and it retails for $29.95.

Also recently released are volumes four and five from the *Robotech Perfect Collection* at $19.95 each, from the series *Macross*, *Southern Cross* and *Genesis Climber Mospeada* (a.k.a. "New Generation") in both English and the original Japanese with English subtitles.

The Critic Gets a Facelift: Beginning in March, 10 new episodes of *The Critic* will be airing after *The Simpsons* on the Fox Network.

"We made a lot of changes since the first season," says co-producer Mike Reiss. "We have the luxury that most shows don't have, to see what people liked and didn't like and work from that. We've improved it in every area: the writing and the characters and the design."

Co-producer Al Jean adds, "People who saw the show said it was funny but they felt sorry for Jay Sherman."

"He got dumped on too much, so we're making him more of a positive character. He still has his edge and he's very

satirical, but he won't be such a loser," Reiss says.

So, the writers are giving the Critic a girl friend Alice Tompkins (played by Park Overall from *Empty Nest*), an actress from Tennessee who seeks a career in New York. She's a divorced mother with a four-year-old daughter named Penny (Russi Taylor).

A major change is in the show's art direction. Originally, Jean says, "We had several design work on it. People thought the design wasn't uniform. So, we're making the characters more consistent with one another. Things are *slightly* more cartoony. We gave Jay a little bit of a weight loss. His cheeks aren't quite so jowl-ley. His mother and father, a little less pale and less stiff. It's

Dirty Pair: Affair on Nolandia is one of a dozen-odd Streamline Pictures gaming wider release through Orion Home Video.

All Streamline Art: Courtesy Streamline Pictures

Pair Art: Copyright 1994 Haruka Takachiho & Studio Nue

something similar to what happened with *The Simpsons* in the second season, where the basic look was refined and perfected.

"We're brightening the palette somewhat so it'll be a better blend with *The Simpsons*. We're going to do a cross-over. Mike and I produced a *Simpsons* episode where Jay, the Critic, appears. That'll probably run a week before or the same week that we premiere. We Simpsonized our Critic designs. There's a Springfield film festival where everybody in town has entered a movie, and Jay comes on to be the judge."

In the second season, *The Critic*'s production budget was slashed, and the writers had to make some adjustments accordingly, such as writing fewer crowd scenes to animate.

"One of the problems with animation is that the budgets are very difficult to meet," Jean points out. "You have a show that costs almost a million an episode, and until you get to be a hit and until the merchandise money rolls in, you have to be really conscious. So when we cut our budget, we said we would make it simpler, try to reuse sets. It's still a 100 times more complicated than a sitcom."

As in the first season, *The Critic* will lampoon popular movies, in which Jay Sherman reviews such films as *Dennis the Menace 2 Society*, *Star Trek: Generation 'X'* with Keanu Reeves and *Planet of the Dogs The Cockroach King* occurs in the middle of New York, with cockroaches and rats congregating like the beginning of *The Lion King*. A certain Tim Burton movie is parodied in *The Nightmare before Hanukkah*, which has actual stop-motion animation by director Laura MacMullen

Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert play themselves in "Siskel & Ebert & Jay & Alice"—in which they break up.

"They have an argument with each other, and the arguments so violent that they start punching each other like a barroom brawl," Jean reveals. "Jay joins up with each of them, and then he realizes that they're better off together, so he arranges for them to get together again, like *Sleepless in Seattle*."

Says Reiss, "It's a very funny show. Siskel and Ebert sing in it. They even harmonize. They're really good sports. We recorded them in Chicago. Rex Reed and Gene Shalit also have cameos in the episode. Sort of a Critics All-Stars show."

"Sherman of Arabia": In the Persian Gulf War, Jay was the one film critic to be caught in Iraq. He rescues all the prisoners like Lawrence of Arabia.

All smiles at the 22nd Annie Awards ceremony, host Mark (The Joker) Hamill clowns with ASIFA Hollywood President Antran Manoogian.

"All the Duke's Men": The Ted Turner-like Duke Phillips, Jay's boss, runs for President *à la* Ross Perot

"I Can't Believe it's a Clips Show!": Jay and his friends are held hostage, and Milton Berle plays a ninja who saves them.

"The clips show is mostly new material," Mike Reiss says. "The clips will be from the previous season on ABC. You won't see anything repeated from the [second season] episodes."

"Most people were watching Tonya Harding when we were on ABC. So it'll be new material to 99% of America," Al Jean says with a chuckle.

***Gargoyles* Update:** Shortly before *Gargoyles* premiered in October with its five-part mini-series, Disney executives were impressed enough to give it a full 65-episode commitment. As reported last issue, Disney's Japanese studio produced the series—but the quality was unsatisfactory. For the remainder of the series, storyboards will be done in the States, giving the producers tighter control of the show. Interestingly, Disney TV Animation has hired some of the same storyboard artists who worked on *Batman: The Animated Series*.

An Unabridged Turtle: When *Touché Turtle* was on the Family Channel last year, two five-minute episodes were time-compressed into one seven-minute segment, with opening titles removed. Now the swash-buckling shellback is on the Cartoon Network, which assures Animation Scene that the original shorts will air *intact* at their full length, uncompressed, and Touché will no longer speak like a chipmunk.

What's Next for the Disney Afternoon? *Duck Daze* is what. Thirty-nine episodes are slated for fall 1995. It's a '90s adventure-comedy series starring Donald Duck (Tony Anselmo), his girl friend Daisy (Kath Soucie), and Donald's rambunctious nephews Huey (E.G. Daily), Dewey (Jeanie Elias) and Louie (Pam Segal)—who are now 16 year-old adolescents! Daisy is now a TV reporter who has to contend with a pompous anchorman and a jealous Donald. Storywise the ducks will be solving mysteries around the world, though some (20 percent) will be in Duckburg. No word yet on guest appearances by Uncle Scrooge, Launchpad McQuack, Gizmoduck, Darkwing Duck or Mickey and Goofy.

New Disney OVAs: Due to the success of *The Return of Jafar*, new direct-to-videos are in the works featuring Winnie the

The Cat in the Hat meets Mayzie McGrew in *Daisy-Head Mayzie*, based on a long-lost Dr. Seuss manuscript.

Pooh, and sequels to *Lady and the Tramp*, *The Lion King* and *Aladdin*.

New Dr. Seuss: *Daisy-Head Mayzie* is based on a 20-year-old manuscript discovered by Audrey Geisel (the wife of Theodor Geisel, a.k.a. Dr. Seuss). The special is directed by Tony Collingwood, produced by Christopher O'Hare and executive produced by Audrey Geisel and Buzz Potamkin.

The perils of overnight success haunt Mayzie McGrew, who wakes up one day with a daisy growing on her head. She has to contend with jealous schoolmates, well-meaning but perplexed adults, a swarm of bees and a sleazy agent (Finagle, voiced by Tim Curry) who wants to exploit her. Fortunately, Mayzie is helped by the Cat in the Hat. Other voices include Jonathan Winters, George Hearn, Lewis Arquette and Henry Gibson as the Cat in the Hat (originally voiced by Allan Sherman in the 1972 *Cat in the Hat* special by DePatie-Freleng).

Produced by Hanna-Barbera Cartoons, Inc., in association with Tony Collingwood productions, *Mayzie* will air on TNT February 5 at 7 p.m. EST.

"New" on the Cartoon Network: Coming this month are *James Bond Jr.*, *Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm* and *G-Force*. Produced as *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman* ("Ganderman") in Japan, the series was imported to the States as *Battle of the Planets* in 1978, a censored version with additional footage of a cute robot called 7-Zark-7 (voiced by Alan Young). Fred Ladd redubbed 85 episodes of the series and retitled it *Guardians of Space: G-Force*. Only a couple of episodes of this new version aired on TBS a few years ago; now it will *all* be seen on the Cartoon Network.

—Bob Miller

Daisy Art: Copyright 1994 Hanna-Barbera Cartoons, Inc. & Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P.

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COMICS screen

COMICS REPORTER

Tank Girl Photo: Suzanne Tenner/Copyright 1994 United Artists Pictures

Lori Petty is *Tank Girl*, driving hell-bent for leather (in her very own tank) into a theater near you in March.

All of these projects are live-action unless specified. Those boxed are new or updated since last listing. **Not everything listed will ultimately *ever* be made.** S: script; D: director; P: producer; EP: executive producer; C: creator; AN: animated; LA: live-action; Syn: syndicated; HB: Hanna-Barbera; Nel: Nelvana; WD: Disney; WB: Warner Bros.; PP: Paramount; U: Universal; Col: Columbia; Am: Amblin; DH: Dark Horse; FR: Film Roman; QDE: Quincy Davis Entertainment. **Attn. all pros:** Info to be added to this list is cheerfully invited. Send to COMICS SCENE, 475 Park Ave. South, 8th Flr., NY, NY 10016. (Info as of 12/22/94)

❑ **Accident Man.** Film. S: Pat Mills, Tony Skinner.

The Airtight Garage. AN. EP: Kurosawa Ent. P: Philippe Rivier. D: Moebius, Katsuhiro Otomo. S: Randy Lofficier.

❑ **Alias.** Film. U. S: David S. Goyer. (see article)

❑ **Annie & the Tomorrow Team.** AN. TV project. Fremantle.

Archie. Film. DIC.

The Badger. Film/TV. PP.

Barbarella. Film. Nel.

❑ **Batman Forever.** Sequel. W/Val Kilmer. D: Joel Schumacher. Summer.

Betty Boop. AN film. S: Jerry Rees. EP: R. Fleischer, R. Zanuck.

Biker Mice from Mars. Film. P: Al Ruddy, Andre Morgan, David Chan. S: Greg Johnson.

❑ **Blade.** S: David S. Goyer. D: Ernest Dickerson. (see article)

Casper. Film. Am/U. D: Brad Silberling. Summer '95.

Catwoman. Film. WB. S: Dan Waters.

❑ **Crying Freeman.** Film. D: C. Gans. W/M. Dacascos, R.D. Chang.

❑ **Daredevil.** Film. Fox. D: Carlo Carlei. S: Carlei, Chris Columbus. P: Ben Myron, Tony Ludwig, Alan Riche.

❑ **Dr. Strange.** Film. S: David S. Goyer. Col. (see article)

Doom's IV. Film. P/S: Rob Liefeld. Am.

Dudley Do-Right. Film. U.

❑ **Dungeons & Dragons.** Film. Sweetpea Ent. S: Topper Lilien & Carroll Cartwright.

Elektra Assassin. Film.

Elfquest. AN film. P: Ed Pressman.

❑ **Fantastic Four.** Film. D: Chris Columbus.

Faust. Film. D: Stuart Gordon. S: David Quinn.

Felix the Cat. AN. FR.

❑ **Fist of the North Star.** Film. D: T. Randel. W/G. Daniels, C. Mandylor.

❑ **Freakazoid.** AN series. WB/Am. P: Bruce Timm, Paul Dini.

❑ **Ghost Rider.** Film. S: David S. Goyer. Savoy. (see article)

G.I. Joe. Film.

Gothik. Film. P: Jeff Most.

Green Hornet. Film. U.

❑ **Grimjack.** Film.

Hate. AN Film. S: Peter Bagge. Colossal Pictures.

❑ **Incredible Hulk.** Film. U. P: Gale Anne Hurd. S: John Turman.

Inspector Gadget. Film. S: J. Loeb III, M. Weisman. U.

❑ **Jonny Quest.** AN & LA films. S: Fred Dekker. New AN series.

Judge Dredd. Film. W/Sylvester Stallone. D: Danny Cannon. July bow.

Kull. Film. U. S: C. Pogue.

Li'l Abner. Film. P: Ernest Chambers.

Lt. Blueberry. Film. P: Eclectic Films.

Little Lulu. AN. Lulu: Tracey Ullman.

❑ **Luke Cage.** Film. S: Ron Friedman. (see article)

Machine. Film. P: Larry Gordon. DH. U.

The Mask. AN series. FR. CBS.

❑ **The Men in Black.** Film. Col/Am. May star Tommy Lee Jones.

Mickey Mouse. New AN theatrical shorts. WD.

D&D Art: Copyright 1994 TSR/Courtesy Sweetpea

Finally, film rights have been picked up for the pioneering fantasy game, *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Film. D: Bryan Spicer.

Mr. Magoo. Film. Am/WB.

Modesty Blaise. Film. Miramax. P: Marcelo Anciano, Michael Berrow.

❑ **Mortal Kombat.** Film. P: Larry Kasanoff. W/Christopher Lambert. Spring release.

NeverEnding Story. AN. Nel.

Nexus. AN film. HB.

Peanuts. Film. P/S: John Hughes. WB.

The Phantom. Film. PP.

Pit Bulls. Film. P: Larry Gordon. DH. U.

Plastic Man. Film. WB/Am.

❑ **Pocahontas.** AN film. WD. June release.

Prince Valiant. Film. S: M. Beckner, Roger Kumble, Marlene King. N. Constantin.

The Saint. Film. PP.

❑ **Sandman.** Film. S: Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio. P: Oren Koules, Alan Riche.

Sgt. Rock. Film. P: Joel Silver. S/D: John Milius. WB.

Sheena. TV series. Col.

Sin City. S: Frank Miller.

❑ **Silver Surfer.** Film. S: John Turman. D: Chuck Russell (possibly). Neue Constantin.

Speed Racer. Film. S: J.J. Abrams. WB.

❑ **Spider-Man.** AN. (see article) LA film. D: Jim Cameron.

The Spirit. LA & AN projects. P: Michael Uslan, Ben Melnicker.

Spy vs. Spy. Film. S: Gene Quintano. P: Steven Tisch, QDE.

❑ **Stretch Armstrong.** Film. D: William Dear. S: Mike Werb, Michael Colleary.

Tank Girl. Film. D: Rachel Talalay. W/Lori Petty. UA. Spring release.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles IV. Film. New Line.

Terry & the Pirates. TV. Syn. Fall 1995.

V for Vendetta. Film. S: Hilary Henkin. D: Brett Leonard. P: Joel Silver.

Virus. Film. DH. S: Chuck Pfarrer. P: Gale Anne Hurd. U.

X. Film. DH. U.

X-Men. Film. Fox. P: Lauren Shuler-Donner. S: Andrew Kevin Walker.

Yummy Fur. Film. D: Bruce McDonald. Yorktown Prods.

Zen Intergalactic Ninja. Film. D: Brian Yuzna.

Zorro. Film. D: Mikael Salomon. TriStar. S: Terry Rossio, Ted Elliott.

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